

**Pathway to True Freedom
& Echoes of Hope from a
Prison Chaplain's Ministry**

TEACH THEM

(Book 2 of 2)

**Complete with Critical Thinking Questions
for Prison Ministry, Addiction Counseling,
Youth Study Group Discussions
and One-On-One Discipling**

Michael O. Ojewale

For a quick overview of
BACK TO BASICS MINISTRY and
“TeachThem” Book Distribution,
turn to the INTRODUCTION,
POSTSCRIPT, and APPENDIX 2. .

This copy of ***Teach Them*** is more than a book; it is a
“Printed Encourager.” It is a church-oriented tool
“to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the
captives... to set at liberty those who are oppressed”
(Lk. 4:18), for one-on-one discipleship, mentoring,
and a resource for the local church.

NOT FOR SALE

Teach Them is circulated in churches on the basis of
“Get 1 book for a minimum donation of \$10.00 or \$XX.00”,
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Back to Basics Ministry is a local church-oriented organization. That’s why we offer “Teach Them” publication as
(1) a ministry resource for evangelism, discipleship, and
peer-to-peer mentoring in the local church. Consequently,
the pastor decides the pricetag for his/her membership
and (2) as an opportunity for partnership with the local
church to support our outreach to the youths in higher
institutions of learning—our future leaders.

Pathway to True Freedom & Echoes of Hope from a Prison Chaplain's Ministry

TEACH THEM

(Book 2 of 2)

A “Printed Encourager” to Those Incarcerated in Prisons Behind Bars, and Those Locked up in Prisons Without Walls, in Bondage to Self-destructive Habits, Chained Down to Unforgiving & Vengeful Spirits, Strangled by Addictions and Crippling Relationships.

A Thematic Resource for
Small Groups,
“House Churches,”
Remote Study Groups,
Peer-to-Peer Mentoring, and
Missionary Teams and Field Evangelists

Covering Wide Ranging Topics Such as, Memoir of a Prison Chaplain, Biblical Foundations for Prison Ministry, Christian Duty of Forgiving Others and Pursuing Peace, Spiritual Warfare, The Three Enemies of the Christian, Overcoming Addictions, Ministering to Inmates during 2020 Global Pandemic Lockdown, Author's Story—Musing and Mulling, and Many More.

Michael O. Ojewale

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TEACH THEM (Formerly “Uncle Mike Answers Your Questions”),
Books 1 and 2.

The original *Uncle Mike Answers Your Questions* (17 chapters) is available as a free audio book on our website. A bibliography section is lacking for two reasons: 1) although the work is scholarly and educational, I did not set out to make it an “academic” work, and 2) I will have to put the hundreds of books in my personal library in the bibliography section. I guess I can say that this work tells my story and growth at different chapters of my life.

Visit us online to listen to the audio book, *Uncle Mike Answers Your Questions* at www.BacktoBasicsMinistry.org

DISCLAIMER: This publication is MY AUTHENTIC VOICE, not the echo of someone else’s. The opinions and statements contained in this publication are mine—in their entirety. They do not represent those of the DOCCS, Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, my colleagues at work, or any other governmental agency, in any way, shape or form.

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Introduction

These two divisions—“Dear Uncle Mike” (Book 1) and “Dear Chaplain” (Book 2)—also represent the two sides of my life and ministry for the past two decades. One side, the “Dear Uncle Mike series,” represents my years in the classroom as science teacher with preteens and teenagers who were controlled more by hormones than the cerebral. After school closed, with my interaction with these boisterous and sometimes rambunctious kids still buzzing in my head, was that stage of my constant struggle, study and meditation on how the church could effectively reach and impact these preteens and teenagers with the abundant life Jesus promises and to mobilize them to become soldiers for Christ.

The second side of my life, the “Dear Chaplain” series represents my ministry as a Protestant chaplain in a State Correctional facility. Although I am a chaplain to every inmate and staff—religious or nonreligious—when I function in any Protestant meeting, service, Bible study or prayer, I can be authentic, in my true color, and unapologetically present to anyone what my faith has to offer to make life worth living. In the “Dear Chaplain” series if it comes across to you that I restate or reiterate [I just did it again] the same point in several ways, you may be right and it’s deliberate. Blame the teacher in me for that. Splitting the manuscript into two books (Books 1 and 2) was a last-minute decision.

There were four of us chaplains in the facility belonging to four major religions, but we cater to all religious organizations that are recognized by the Dept. of Corrections. We have the best collegial team spirit and it’s been reported by some visiting auditors (whether true or false, it’s their opinion) that we were the most intellectual group of chaplains they’ve met. I was the last to come on board; the longest serving, the Imam, is a physician, MD, by first calling. While some facilities report in-fighting among chaplains and strained relationship with the DSP and/or Exec. Team, we could not have

asked for better peers of clergy or a better Deputy Superintendent of Programs (DSP) in charge of programs and religious organizations, or a better Superintendent.

- 1. The prison is a microcosm (or small-scale version) of the society.** This is true because incarcerated individuals did not come from Mars, and were not a different breed of the human race. They were sons and daughters, dads and moms, from all walks of life. They had been bona fide members of the neighborhoods, gated suburbs, high-density housing apartments, tenement buildings, Wall Street, Silicon Valley, alumni associations, colleges, churches, mosques, synagogues, etc., nonpartisans, and registered democrats and republicans. Therefore, any ministry, or ministry resource to the microcosm (the prison population) is equally relevant, suitable, and applicable to the macrocosm (the larger society). Hence, prison chaplaincy is not a ministry tucked away from society, in a deserted faraway outskirts of society; rather, it is a ministry to society and for society; and especially to a group of society the King refers to as, “*one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine*” (Matt. 25:40; NIV). You could say this is my way of echoing apostle Paul’s sentiment: “*I magnify my ministry*” (Rom. 11:13).
- 2. *Imago Dei* (Latin for image of God; Gen. 1:26, 27; 5:1) is the reason we have a gospel to preach because the worst of us is still *Imago Dei* (God’s image bearer) and is, therefore, not beyond God’s redemption.** Because of the Fall, anyone today may be in the category of “*Imago Dei*, marred by sin,” “*Imago Dei*, deformed by vicissitudes of life,” “*Imago Dei*, damaged by wrong choices,” “*Imago Dei*, distorted by misconduct and crime,” “*Imago Dei*, perverted by arrogance,” or “*Imago Dei*, ruined by a life of addiction to destructive lifestyle.” Yet, such an individual— *Imago Dei*, made in the image of God, is still God’s image bearer, he is redeemable, Christ died for him, and he is loved unconditionally by

God (Psa. 8:4-6; 100:3). Saul of Tarsus, later, the apostle Paul, could once be described as, “*Imago Dei*, blinded by religion, distorted by murderous intentions in fanatical defense of human traditions.”

Yet, he penned, “*And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. **This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief***” (The apostle Paul in 1 Tim. 1:12-15).

- 3. Deep humility and compassion blossom when I can see myself in others’ shoes, especially when they are not at their best.** I remind myself, “*All have sinned*” (Rom. 3:23). Their way of sinning may be different from my way of sinning. Still, “*all have sinned.*” It’s a broken world. Then I ask myself: “What if I had been raised in the geographic, cultural, religious, and socio-economic settings in the ways that this person had been raised, and had been formed (or malformed) in the ways he’d been formed (or malformed), would I be any different from him today?” Probably not! This does not come to me naturally because my natural disposition, by default, is to criticize and pass judgment. Therefore, I have to be intentional in seeing myself in the other person’s shoes, and be deliberate in viewing the world through his lens, in order for me to overcome my self-righteous and judgmental attitude so I can be present, listen, learn and lift the person up, rather than beating him up.
- 4. My world is transformed when I position myself to help someone else.** Subsequently, a part of the universe is healed of its brokenness when the person welcomes my gesture and receives my help. It is my belief that as a small pebble that’s thrown into a quiet pond causes ripples or waves that spread out from the spot

to the far end of the body of water, in like manner, the little good I do in my corner of the world may have some rippling effects on the other hemisphere. Therefore, I am resolved to do the little (or seemingly insignificant) acts of kindness that are in my power to do everyday. Most times, it is the 5-minutes chat with an inmate (or staff) that makes the whole day's work worthwhile. The feeling is heavenly when, out of the blue, a chaplain receives a "thank you" note from an inmate. Once in a blue moon, an inmate—regardless of his religious leanings—accosts a chaplain in the walkway and expresses sentiments such as, "I just want you to know that you people are the light in this dark place. You are our last hope. I want to thank you for your presence here and for what you do for us." The feeling that follows mystically erases all the accumulated stress and strain that come with the work.

5. **In pursuit of a moral, fair, and just society, the end does not justify the means.** If we fail to balance truth with grace, justice with compassion, we run the risk of becoming the evil we originally set out to defeat and eradicate. This posture is of importance especially when an inmate (or staff) portrays the beastly or demonic side of his being instead of the human. Evil does not cancel out evil. Rather, counter culturally, love and kindness in return for hatred and evil is the law of the Kingdom (Matt. 5:44; Lk. 6:27). Hence, the Biblical injunction, "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*" (Rom. 12:21).
6. **Change is inevitable; it is happening around us everyday, everywhere.** Some changes are good, healthy, desirable and progressive; other changes are destructive, disruptive, adverse, and outrightly demonic. However, planned change that anticipates different scenarios of foreseeable and unforeseeable, pleasant and unpleasant change is better than change that's forced on us. The Bible warns that in these last days, things will go from bad to worse in every aspect of life and society (Matt. 24; 2 Pet. 3; 1 Thess. 5;

Luke 21; 1 Tim. 4; 2 Tim. 3). Nevertheless, the darker it is the brighter a little light (or, little faith) shines and the more distinct it becomes in the environment (John 16:33; Dan. 12). In addition, the Law of Entropy states that everything—houses, automobiles, human’s physical body, marriage, society, the cosmos, even with intentionality and constant maintenance—is subject to undergo depreciation, deterioration and disintegration over time. In government, business or religion, only those who proactively plan ahead for such eventualities will thrive in the devolutions that are obvious and gravely imminent. “A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit” (Greek Proverb). The old men (and women) had planted for the sustenance and comfort of generations yet unborn. This underscores the dire need for church leadership with foresight and sacrificial love.

7. **The trio of Love, Service, and Generosity are the best forms of actions, ever.** They not only speak louder than words, their effect also reverberates to future generations. Just as “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26), so also passionate preaching without corresponding actions is like an automobile that’s passed the State inspection but is empty of gasoline. (That car is going nowhere! And so is the passionate, doctrinal preaching that’s devoid of corresponding action.) You are on Christ’s team when you love, serve or give. *“By this we know love, because He [Jesus] laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? ... If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also”* (1 Jn. 3:16, 17; 4:20, 21).
8. **Inspiration and Transformation are my ultimate prayers and goals for this work.** As a preacher and author, I put good sermons

and good books in three categories; bad sermons and bad books belong in one category—they are just bad! Some good sermons and good books inform us; they are loaded with facts and well-researched materials, the goal is knowledge or educational. Other good sermons/books reform us; they are practical, motivational, entertaining, and self-help type, the goal is knowledge to do something. Some other good sermons/books transform us; they are informational, re-formatational; and inspirational, they breathe life into us, they encourage and empower us to change. The goal is all-inclusive of knowledge, doing, and being. The ultimate goal is inner change, to stir up our spirit and connect us with the Spirit, to be or become a new person. Become, as in “*He gave the right [or power, KJV] to **become children of God***” (John 1:12), or “*all things have **become new***” (2 Cor. 5:17). The result is a person thinking and behaving differently, because he’s been “*transformed by the renewing of [his] mind*” (Rom. 12:2).

[Inspiration: from the Latin *inspiratus* (the past participle of *inspirare*, “to breathe into, inspire”); Middle English had the sense of “divine guidance” or “immediate influence of God or a god”.

Transform: From Old French, or from Late Latin: *transformare*; from two words, *trans* meaning “across” or “beyond” and *formare* meaning, “to form.” Transform, therefore, is to go beyond the form of; “to change the form or shape,” to change into another form].

Inspiration is more a person reaching a point of wanting to act, whereas motivation is more of giving people reasons to act. It’s the difference between babysitting and empowerment, incentives, or influence. There is a need for both inspiration and motivation. While both the inspiration to give (or serve), and the motivation to give (or serve), may yield the same results of donation (or service), they nonetheless originate from different sources. The term motivation comes from the word “motive” which means the needs

or drives within a person. In contrast, inspiration is the process in which an individual is mentally encouraged to do something, because his thinking process has been renewed, or transformed. While motivation is always from an external source in an external environment, inspiration comes from within. To be inspired is to be “in spirit,” to be elevated into another realm of being. Happily, some sermons and books elevate us to another realm of being by the ways they *trans-form* us; they “change” or “alter” our “form”, and we are never again the same persons we used to be. It is my earnest prayer that this work will be inspirational and transformational for every reader.

9. **TPH Mission: A youthful dream comes alive at last.** As one of the young Christian leaders in the 70s in my university days, I had a dream of a traveling, itinerary or circuit ministry based on Matthew 4:23 and 9:35 (I’ve always been a dreamer).

“And Jesus went about all Galilee, TEACHING in their synagogues, PREACHING the gospel of the kingdom, and HEALING all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people... Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, TEACHING in their synagogues, PREACHING the gospel of the kingdom, and HEALING every sickness and every disease among the people” (4:23, 9:35; emphasis mine).

I titled the ministry “**TPH Mission**”, in line with the threefold ministry of Jesus in Galilee, other cities and villages, which was, Teaching, Preaching and Healing. I had a logo, some letterhead paper and business card for TPH Mission. As “Jesus went about all cities and villages,” I would also be visiting different places to teach, preach and heal in Jesus’ name. I shared the vision with close friends who were fellow Christians. Somehow, I never formally established a ministry named TPH Mission over the years after my university days, but the vision didn’t go away. I believe it was transformed into several things I was doing in the ministry, because, in a sense, the core of

Teach Them

Christian ministry is all about teaching, preaching, and healing. However, as I completed this work, it began to dawn on me, that probably this two-volume series, *Teach Them*, is the way I am supposed to, eventually, live out my youthful dream of *TPH Mission—teaching, preaching, and healing ministries*. Without a shadow of doubt, I can say that the two-volume series, *Teach Them*, fulfills the long-ago vision of TPH Mission—teaching, preaching, and healing ministries. As soon as possible, we intend to make the series available as free e-books and audio books. May God make it happen in a way that only God can make things happen, that is: “*exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us,*” (Eph. 3:20). Amen.

In honor and loving memory of
Evangelist (Reverend) Bola Sanni
The Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo
Bishop Titus Olugbenga David
The Reverend Dele Ijagbulu
The Reverend Gbenga Ewejobi
The Reverend (Prof./Mrs.) Kenny Ayenibiowo
Pa (Deacon) Paul Omehen Uwaya
(Gideonite) Oladele Otaniyi and
(Mother-in-Israel) Mrs. Olawanle T. Ojewale

Before they exited the stage, they each wrote their chapters in the One Story of God—the Story of the Universe, and sang their assigned parts in the One Song of God—the Song of the Universe. They “served God’s purpose in [their] own generation,” (Acts 13:36; NIV). In the same way that the Apostle Paul wrote, “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus” (Gal. 6:17), I can also say I bear in my body the fingerprints of these saints in glory.

“Blest be the tie that binds...”

“And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this down: Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, they are blessed indeed, for they will rest from their hard work; for their good deeds follow them!’” (Rev. 14:13; NLT)

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Author's Preface to Book 2

It was early in the year, 1975, in Nigeria, University of Ife, Ile-Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). It was my prelim year, later referred to as the first year, in the University. I was the assistant Bible study leader for the Student Christian Movement (SCM) while Brother¹ Caleb Adeodun—of blessed memory, who I also mentioned in the last chapter—was the Bible study leader for the group. Somehow, the SCM received a letter from a prison inmate in Ile-Ife prison that we should come in to lead Christian religious studies and services. Taking a cue from Jesus who sent His disciples out two-by-two, the group then mandated brother Caleb and I—the Bible study team leaders—to go do religious services in the prison.

The following Sunday, brother Caleb and I showed up at the Ile-Ife prison with a bundle of tracts, our Bibles, our university student identity cards, and the letter from the prison inmate. We had come to lead a Sunday service. They told us it did not work that way; that we had to write and apply to be allowed to come in to do religious services on certain days and specific time. We were provided the guidelines and whom to address the request letter to. Brother Caleb, bless his heart, said we could not go back to campus empty handed. We had come to Ile-Ife Township to win souls and there were souls to be saved. So, we spent the rest of the day doing street evangelism to those on the streets and knocking on doors to tell people about Christ. It was a successful outing.

When we reported back to the group our stalled mission to the prison and eventual street evangelism, the idea of Ile-Ife Street Evangelism subgroup (or ministry) was tabled and approved. This was relayed to the entire group during Bible study and prayer meetings. Interested members signed up and started going to the Ile-Ife Township weekly to do Street Evangelism.

1. Old school: Back in the day we addressed each other as Brother or Sister So-and-so, as if Brother or Sister were the first names.

We got a favorable reply from the prison authorities. Again, brother Caleb and I were the first two to go lead religious service on a Sunday in the Ile-Ife prison. Brother Caleb was older than me in age; he was in his third (or penultimate) year in the university, I was in my first year; he was the substantive Bible study leader, and I was his assistant. There had been no prior planning between the two of us what we would do or sharing of assignment. I had thought I was to him what Joshua was to Moses, or Timothy to Paul, just tagging along and learning the ropes.

The inmates were brought to the open yard. They sat on the concrete steps. Brother Caleb addressed and welcomed the 20-30 inmates before us. I interpreted into Yoruba for the benefit of those who did not understand English very well. He led us in singing choruses and prayers. I interpreted for him. After bringing the devotional to a crescendo, he said, "You will now listen to the word of God." I interpreted that too. Characteristically, he then turned to me and said, "Over to you." Bewildered, I whispered, "What do you mean by over to me?" He said, "It's your turn, you are preaching." I said, "You didn't tell me." I could tell the inmates in attendance were enjoying this strange exchange. He replied, "We are soldiers for Christ. Always 'Be prepared' like the Scouts." As senior brother, he encouraged me, "Don't worry, open your mouth wide, I will fill it says the Lord." So, I did.

I opened my mouth wide and shouted, "Praise the Lord!" They gave the expected choral response, "Halleluiah." My mind was racing wildly. Should I use John 3:16 as my text for an evangelistic message? I had little or no time to decide, so I yelled again, bidding for time, "Praise the Lord." Again, they chorused, "Halleluiah!" Maybe I should use John 14:6 as text. As if I had not gotten enough of their attention with my two clarion "Praise the Lord" calls, I yelled again, louder with a drawl, "P-r-a-i-s-e the L-o-r-d!" They gave the loudest response yet, "Hal-le-lu-iah!!!" Now what? I recalled the TV telecast of a sermon by the televangelist Reverend Rex Humbard of the US. For some reasons, the same sermon was broadcast on two consecutive Sundays during the just ended 1974 Christmas/New Year's school recess. He had preached on "Four Things God Does Not Know." The message stuck with me, because I

had listened to it twice. On the spot, I decided to preach the message.

I said, "I want to tell you four things God does not know." Brother Caleb hesitated to interpret. He looked at me as if I had lost my mind and waited for me to correct myself. I reiterated, "Many people believe that God knows everything, but I am here to tell you four things that God Himself does not know." You should have been there to see the look on Caleb's face. He interpreted, "He wants to tell you four things God wants you to know." I noticed subdued laughter and giggling in the crowd. So, I decided to let out the cat and reveal my four-points sermon outline, thereby robbing it of the suspenseful effect. I said, "First, God does not know a sin He does not hate." Caleb interpreted, "God wants you to know there's no sin He does not hate." I noticed more giggling from those who understood the two languages. I said, "Second, God does not know a sinner He does not love." Caleb said, "God wants you to know there's no sinner He does not love." Hoping that by now Caleb would realize I wasn't blaspheming or trying to deny God of His omniscience and would cooperate, I said, "Third, God does not know another way to save anyone than through Christ." Yes, Caleb could not bring himself to say, "God does not know" anything. I concluded, "Fourth, God does not know a better time to save you than now." Caleb said it his own way. I then continued to preach on the four points but anytime I said, "God does not know," Caleb interpreted, "God wants you to know." Except for the miscues in the interpretations, it was a very successful outreach to the prison. We prayed with those who wanted to receive Christ for the first time.

During our debriefing after the service, Caleb still maintained that I could have made the same points saying, "God wants you to know" rather than insinuating that there were things "God Himself does not know." When we reported to the SCM executive meeting all were enthusiastic about the prison ministry. The membership was informed and interested members signed up. Surprisingly, a good number signed up. So, early in 1975 two new ministry subgroups were added to the SCM Unife, many thanks to the leadership of Caleb Adeodun.

During subsequent visits to the prison on Sundays for service, we were

allowed to go in and speak with inmates in their cells, especially those who were not let out of the cell. For reasons I don't know, the one-on-one was more in the juvenile sections of the jail. Here were people of my age group behind bars; first time offenders with nonviolent misdeeds. Many of the ones I interviewed and shared the gospel with told me they were in jail for stealing, many times petty stealing. Their stories were disheartening and demoralizing for me. I couldn't deal with that. I finally dropped out of the prison ministry. A founding member of the Unife SCM prison ministry quit! Not necessarily because I could find myself in the shoes of those behind the bars that I was sharing with, which was a factor, but much more so because I was awestricken thinking of the possibility of selective grace. The "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated," (Mal. 1:2, 3; Rom. 9:12-14) kind of unmerited favor and the responsibility that being spared or chosen brings. The same thoughts always nag me whenever a contemporary of mine is suddenly deceased. I asked within myself: Why him? Why had I been spared? What does it mean to be spared? What responsibility does it demand?

I considered it was unfair that many of those juveniles in Ile-Ife prison were just unlucky to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's disastrous for them to end up being shut up behind bars at such a tender age with the stigma that goes with that after release. If, because of poverty, poor judgment, and misinformation they had been powerless against an unjust system that had jailed them without due cause, they were now in a more precarious situation. Knowing how mischievous and adventurous in the negative ways I had been in my high school days prior to my Christian conversion in Easter 1972, I considered that I should have ended up in prison sooner and for more consequential misdemeanors than the teenagers and young adults I was speaking with, had it not been for the loving-kindness (Heb. *chesed*) and mercy of God. It's called, grace! Amazing grace. The kind that leaves you amazed and graced.

Chaplain M. O. Ojewale, 2021.

P.S.

1. **20-DAY-SELF-PACED READING/STUDY FOR THE VERY BUSY:** This book is loosely divided into 20-day reading/study portions, Day 1 to Day 20, (or 20-day supplemental devotional readings). To be thorough and effective, one day is devoted to working through the end-of-chapter exercises and the review questions of each chapter.
2. Please read the last chapter, chapter 10 of Book 2. It might be the key that unlocks the book. When you unlock the author's mind you break the code to his work. It is my own self-understanding of those breathtaking, staggering theological postulates of *being chosen in Christ, predestined to adoption by the Father, and good words God ordained and prepared us for from the foundation of the world*, Ephesians 1:4-11 & 2:10. It is also the way I understand God's purpose for my life and how I have applied to myself Jesus' words before Pilate, *"For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world,"* (Jn. 18:37d) and Apostle Paul's remarks, *"It pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace,"* (Gal. 1:15) and *"For it is God who works in [us] both to will and to do for His good pleasure,"* (Philp. 2:13). Do read the appendices as well. It explains why this is "a book of remembrance."
3. By the way, the bonus chapter, "It Happened Because It Had to Happen," in Book 1, is a **MUST READ**.
4. **Teach Them is Not Available in Bookstores.** The books are offered at: Take one book for a minimum donation of \$10.00 (or any amount suggested by the local church) and two books for a minimum donation of \$20.00 (or any amount suggested by the local church). Additional copies are available at participating local churches, or by mail from our website, www.backtobasicsministry.org. If you are requesting copies by mail, for shipping and handling, please include additional 20% or whatever is sufficient to cover postage above the minimum donation required per book for the

number of copies.

5. Because it is a thematic resource, each chapter can stand by itself and you don't have to study the chapters in sequence. You may go to any topic or theme of interest, such as the chapter on Biblical Foundations for Prison Ministry, Christian Duty of Forgiving Others and Pursuing Peace, Spiritual Warfare, The Three Enemies of the Christian, Overcoming Addictions, and many more.
6. ***Incorporate this Book into your Fellowship/Small Group or Start a Back to Basics Study Group.*** Consider bringing friends, family, and colleagues together to form a **Back to Basics Study Group**. In many areas, we all need to get back to the basics, don't we? You may start with a partner, or two friends, or three. You are that little flock Jesus had in mind when He said, *"Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom"* (Luke 12:32). Focus on a chapter that you may read and study privately before coming together for study and fellowship. This may be one hour, or two hours devoted to reading, studying, praying together, and answering the questions at the end of each chapter. Designed by a veteran educator, *Teach Them* is both teacher-friendly and student-friendly as well. Take your time; don't hurry. Some chapters may take longer than one study session. You never can tell who will be helped by it and what such group may develop and grow into. Don't wait anymore; take the initiative. *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth"* (2 Tim. 2:15).
7. ***This Could Be Our Second Wind.*** For mission-conscious, evangelism-minded Christian leaders of my age, who can no longer travel—as we did in our younger years, yet, cannot afford to sit, watch and do nothing. In this two-volume series, my colleagues and I can still go places as **Printed Missionaries** or **Printer Encouragers**. Here we are, send us; please send us.

A Prison Chaplain's Prison Ministry

The Strange World of a Prison Chaplain

Some authors and students working on their dissertations have visited prisons, interviewed inmates and documented inmates' struggles and journey of faith and recovery. Other authors and chaplains have published inmates stories in the inmates' own words. Excons back in society have written their stories and devotionals for inmates. Those are great efforts. Every person's story is worth telling. But I take a different approach. As a chaplain in a State medium security prison facility, I like to think of a prison sentence as a snapshot, a moment in time in the life of the inmate. What I am more concerned with is what happens when the inmate returns to society. For that reason, this book is not about prison ministry; it is about a prison chaplain's prison ministry. Big difference.

This work is also not about what US prisons are like because I've worked in only one prison—a medium security facility. Neither is it about what other chaplains do in their prisons because for close to a decade I've been in relationship with the same set of team players, chaplains of other faiths, and with the same wonderful, magnanimous Deputy of Superintendent of Programs (DSP) under whose purview and auspices the ministerial services operate. Put it another way: It is about my pastoral work as a chaplain, a State employee, in a NY State prison facility.

Writing this chapter has proven to be a very useful journey for me, in that it helped me to uncover the personal philosophy, principle and theological platform that undergird my work as a prison chaplain. I probably spoke too soon when I said reading chapter 10 would decode the author's mind because

chapter 1, as well, is a journey into his recent past. It is a memoir of my work as a prison chaplain. Together, they are like two bookends. That is why, especially in this chapter, if it seems like I am infusing my prior experiences and insight from the classroom as a science teacher with my present work as a prison chaplain, it is because, to me, it is one seamless story of many chapters. I believe every aspect of my life is divinely ordered; *“The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, And He delights in his way... O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps”* (Psa. 37:23; Jer. 10:23). As a Christian, I must strongly believe that; it is what living a faith life is all about. Therefore, every detail, detour, or contour, bitter or sweet, planned, or unplanned, has meaning, relevance and interwoven. Although, left to me, I would love to have been on this job much sooner than I did, and to have spent less time in the classroom, yet, everything happened in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4). Scripture says, *“To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven... He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end”* (Eccl. 3:1, 11). (You may also want to glance at my Postscript to fully appreciate the scope of what I set out to do).

When we, chaplains of different faiths, from different State prison facilities, attend annual conferences, professional training, and development; we share experiences and stories of our work. By this, I am keenly aware of the tremendous work my colleagues do in their various facilities. I’m always humbled, challenged, and fired up as I listen to these chaplains and feel the spirit of compassion and dedication in the room. I sit glued to my seat, experiencing the passion and fire radiating from their souls. I’m humbled to be sitting among these great souls. I’m further humbled that by His grace, I have been afforded the privilege and opportunity to serve in this kind of ministry, knowing fully well that prison ministry is not the calling of every clergy person.

Life in prison is routine, controlled and regimented. Outside the prison walls, life is a jungle; it’s survival of the fittest. It is a dog-eat-dog world, which some think it is more appropriately a man-eat-man world. Believe it or not,

some inmates are safer in prison than on the streets. On a personal note, when friends show concern for my safety because I work in the prison, I tell them that in the present culture of unprovoked random mass shootings, gun violence, road rage and suicide bombers I feel safer and less apprehensive walking around the jail than I feel when I go to the mall or movie theater. Before I became a prison chaplain I periodically listened to some mothers standing up during the church mid-week prayer meetings (in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, NY) thanking God that their sons were incarcerated, because all of their sons' playmates and cousins had died—gunned down—on account of violent gang fights or drug-deal-related deaths. Such prayer of thanks from a mother was strange to my ears then but not any more. Will Rogers, American stage and film actor, humorist and newspaper columnist read a newspaper headline, "Innocent Bystander Shot in New York." He said, "How about that? All you have to do to get shot in New York is to be innocent and stand by."

Everything we do as staff (civilian employees and correctional officers) in the prison while inmates are under our care, custody and control is regulated by directives from the State Capital/Governor's office. There's an administrative directive² for every action and eventuality in the prison system. Including action plans for presently unforeseen circumstances and potentially unforeseeable scenarios, yet once in a while, the department gets blindsided, which is a testament to the complexities of the criminal and penal systems. Besides cameras mounted in some places and the newest innovation of body cameras worn by COs, certain procedures that are liable for scrutiny must be video-recorded. Where and when the directives are silent or vague on an issue, you dare not (or better not) use your discretion; you would talk with your boss or supervisor who also might have to confer with another superior or send an email to a departmental head in Albany before any action is taken.

2. Just a side comment: I read the directives but the other three chaplains who have been in the system longer than me study the directives. Studying as if preparing for a do-or-die final exam or lawsuit. I always have to lean on them to fill in the gaps and for that I am eternally grateful to Deacon S. Young (the coordinating chaplain), Imam E. Gaber and Rabbi S. Gulack. Hello? Isn't that one of the many things that makes us a great team? Let me also say a special shout out to our Deputy Superintendent of Programs, Dep. Marie Hammond.

For those reasons, we do many things right—by the book, and we do many right things, as far as human and religious rights are concerned. I said many, not all. There are cracks and loopholes in any system or organization established and run by humans and those who would seize the slightest advantage to exploit them are never wanting. In most cases, the established checks and balances and chain of command ensure smooth running.

What may be questionable is not the legality of what is done or not done, but the motive behind those right and appropriate actions. Sadly, most times, the driving force is not a genuine desire to honor another's (especially an inmate's) rights but to be able to keep one's job or source of livelihood and especially to avoid the possibility of any grievance, litigation or lawsuit. Above everything else, concerns over grievances and lawsuits have a sanitizing effect in the events and activities happening in the dark places called US prisons. You bet inmates know their rights and, maybe, have more rights inside the prison than in the streets. Some professional inmates, if I may use that term for those who've served many prison terms, relish telling how many lawsuits they (or their family) have brought against the department and won. (I thought I told you it's a strange world.)

Reentry³ and Recidivism⁴

It is easier to be a Bible-studying-and-praying Christian, practicing Jew, devout Moslem or a communicant Catholic in jail than outside. Which is why, when any group or local church representative approaches me with a proposal for them to come to do Bible study in the facility, my first question to them usually is: What do you have for them when they complete their prison terms and return to society? I am more than willing to let you come in, do Bible study and interact with them in jail if that is not an end in itself but a means to an end. The end is to build relationship with them while incarcerated and thereby pave the way for them to know that they have some friends/cheerleaders waiting for them when they return to society. If any

3. The transition of offenders from prisons or jails back into the community.

4. The tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend and be back again in jail.

group or church is not committed to a reentry program, a way of welcoming and assimilating the exconvicts into society, I tell them I can do all my Bible studies with the inmates by myself.

Among all factors that help to reduce recidivism, research has shown that mentoring—one-on-one connection to a good friend who sticks with you and walks with you—towers above all other factors. As important as having a job, housing and family are, mentoring has been shown to be even more important in keeping exconvicts from returning to jail or to a life of crime than having a good job, a house to live in, a return to home with family, or involvement in a local church. The mentor is the person you can be vulnerable with, the person you can call at 2:00 a.m. in the morning and will not be rebuffed. A true mentor is the one who is so committed to your wellbeing you wonder if he has telepathic powers, because he calls or visits you at an unexpected but most needed hour of your life, just at the nick of time when you need to refocus rather than derail. The mentor is a gift of God, a nurturer, and like his Master, who “A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench,” (Matt. 12:20). He’s the one who affirms and reaffirms the humanity and trustworthiness of the exconvict and paves the way for society to give him or her a second chance.

Commitment to visiting inmates, or “one of the least of these My brethen,” (Matt. 25:40), and doing Bible studies with them when incarcerated is a great step and very commendable; yet commitment to being a neighbor, a “Barnabas ... ‘Son of Encouragement’” (Acts 4:36; 9:27), to them when they are back to society is even greater. Who amongst us, from time to time, does not need a Barnabas, an encourager, or a mentor in our journey through life?

The gospel we preach testifies that Jesus died for every soul, every living person. The Apostle Peter reminds us that we “were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, ... but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18, 19), which by implication means every life is priceless to God. Even street people get it right when they say or sing, “God don’t make no junk,” which is their way of affirming that human life, however marred, is still God’s masterpiece. In every broken life is an eternal jewel, the breath of

God. No one is far too gone that he's beyond redemption.

Every soul must be worth something to God, the Maker and Creator, for the Son of God to die on the cross for that soul. Unfortunately, when we see the state or present condition or current station of a person in life, to maintain a distance for our convenience, we give him a label: homeless, derelict, drug addict, lost, or excon. Nevertheless God sees the same person as a soul for whom Christ died, deformed but redeemable, a person of great potential in Christ's Kingdom when touched by grace. God enjoins us to be the conduit pipes for the transmission of His grace especially to those who have given up on themselves, have given up on life, and those who have been deceived into believing that they are a lost cause and no one, not even God, could love them.

Indirect Ministry to Inmates' Family

As you will notice in chapter 10, that is, the last chapter of this book, follow up is key in my thinking. It is so crucial to me that I would hesitate to do any evangelistic ministry until I had thought through how I might provide a systematic way to follow up or reinforce the outreach afterwards. We can say that as it is in the farming business so also it is in the gospel ministry, that sowing, planting, weeding, thinning, pruning, watering and harvesting are different activities in different seasons, and that, often, they are divinely arranged by the Spirit for different persons to undertake. I also know that Paul "planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase," (1 Cor. 3:6). However, as a pastor (or shepherd), I like to satisfy my conscience that I have not left a newborn baby in Christ (1 Pet. 2:2) in the cold to fend for him/herself. This desire for follow up or providing a reinforcing activity/material also featured in my pastoral work as a prison chaplain. It could also be a throwback to the fact that I had spent years in the school system as a subject teacher giving homework assignments to my students. Even when I had a guest preacher or used a recorded DVD of the sermon of a church minister, I always made sure I gave those in attendance something for them to take back with them to their dorms to read or think about after the service.

Although I do not read my sermons, I write out my sermons, almost verbatim, and distribute copies to those in attendance as they walk in. It is my way of providing some follow up to reinforce the Sunday service beyond the time of service. This also helped me steer and slant my ministry towards my strong area, which is writing; (not to mention that I speak with a Nigerian accent). Fast readers would have read or scanned through the printed sermon while we were arranging chairs and setting up equipment for the service. Most inmates appreciated this privilege of previewing. They then waited for me to put voice and drama to the message. If I noticed blank faces staring at me, I often directed their attention to the subtitle or paragraph I was on the sermon sheet in their hands. Indirectly, these printed pages have somehow extended my ministry beyond the prison.

Many inmates told me that they called their wives (more often, girlfriends or “baby mothers”) on Sundays after the service and read and shared my messages with their spouses and prayed together afterward. I would say some did so either to convince their family members that they were religious and going to Sunday worship services while incarcerated in prison or to reach out to their spouses (or girlfriends and “baby mothers”) with the same materials and sermons they had listened to. You could tell that some inmates, from their regular prayer requests, were sincerely concerned about the salvation of their family members. (Some spouses, girlfriends or “baby mothers” had been partners and accessories in their past criminal activities.) The after-Sunday-service phone conversation then provided the opportunity to “preach Christ” to their family. Some inmates were on the verge of losing their spouses, significant others, and family due to repeated incarcerations. The phone call and religious sharing were like their last-ditch effort to salvage their marriage and prove to their spouses that they’d changed. Again, no one could be sure of the motives, whether this was done in sincerity or another devious antic. While it is important to give the benefit of the doubt, I am also keenly aware that many inmates are veteran con artists, sly and conniving. Of course, their spouses and family members knew this too well. The issue was if their family would be willing to forgive the past, the family would believe that

they'd indeed been changed and give them a second (or yet another) chance at self-redemption.

Some inmates asked me for additional copies or made copies of my messages and sent to family and friends. Some who were involved in the local church before incarceration said they were filing and keeping the copies of my sermons and promised to go back to their churches and preach my sermons. Aware of all these, when I wrote out my sermons or mailed out materials to inmates, I was often thinking of their family members at home who might have access to the materials. Therefore, my language was often unrestricted to the inmates in the jail, although they were the primary targets of the message.

You might ask: Isn't it true that a large proportion of the inmates are young and uneducated or poorly educated, and if that's true, aren't you speaking above their heads in some of your writings? The answer to both is Yes. However, my attitude (and position as a NYS permanently certified teacher, 7-12) is that I'd rather they struggle to move up higher (in reading and logical thinking) than for me to dumb down to their level and thereby perpetuate stagnation. I often challenge those on my Protestant service call out that I expect them to improve in all areas of life, spiritually, emotionally, relationally, educationally, and mentally. I encourage those who had dropped out of school to take the opportunity to complete their GED and those who had high school or its equivalence to seize the opportunity to enroll in the college degree programs. Thereby they would be taking something good and positive out of their bad experience of incarceration. We also recognize and celebrate during our services those who graduate or earn their GED and project them to others as positive role models.

The Angel Tree Program of the Prison Fellowship Ministry

Another important ministry we provide for inmates and their families is the Angel Tree Program. The Angel Tree is a program of the Prison Fellowship Ministry. Angel Tree encourages and facilitates the connection between incarcerated parents and their children or stepchildren who are 18 years and under.

Usually, by March or April, the chaplain posts the Angel Tree fliers in English and Spanish in the dorms and religious service areas. Incarcerated parents are encouraged to write to the chaplain to ask for the application form for Angel Tree program, either in English or Spanish. This ministry is open to all parents in the prison who wouldn't be home for Christmas, regardless of their religious or nonreligious status. Christmas is a gift-giving season and most children are brought up to look forward to receiving a gift from their parents, family members (or Santa) during Christmas. The Angel Tree gift catalogue has many gifts that an incarcerated parent can choose from for each child. If they do not have the exact gift, Angel Tree volunteers will try as much as possible to match the inmate parent's gift choice. There is a provision on the form for the inmate to insert any personal word or message to the child at Christmas. The incarcerated parent also has a choice to sign up for a Bible study correspondence and may also send information to family members to enroll his/her child for other Angel Tree ministry besides the Christmas gifts. Some inmates who have sowed their oats generously over the country may have up to six or eight legitimate children in six to eight different addresses to remember and send Christmas gifts and messages. Those ones use two or more Angel Tree application forms.

The Angel Tree volunteers have been mobilized to visit the residential address (not PO address) provided for each child, deliver a gift, the same age-appropriate gift selected by the parent, with the message from the incarcerated parent, to the child at Christmas in his/her absence. In this way, they deliver a personal message of love to children on behalf of their mom or dad in prison. Every Angel Tree parent's family is also given access to a free, easy-to-read copy of the Bible (available in English or Spanish). Incarceration can strain family ties to the breaking point. Working together with prison chaplains, the Angel Tree shares the love of Christ in a tangible way and strengthens family bonds, delivering personalized gifts and the Gospel to children on behalf of their incarcerated parents at Christmas. It starts with a gift and leads to restored relationships. Many inmates have reported the joy and glow on their children's faces when they received a Christmas gift

and love note from the dad in prison. It is not uncommon therefore to find inmates who participated in the program and got an encouraging feedback from their children and “baby mothers” asking me for another Angel Tree application form as early as February. I had to remind them that Angel Tree is a gift-giving program during Christmas and that the next Christmas is many months away.

Chaplain as an Advocate Versus Liaison

Some inmates called me their pastor and would also gladly refer to me as their mentor or role model. Knowing the characteristics of an inmate community, this could be in appreciation and sincerity or sweet-talking to curry favor but whichever, I simply let it be with those individuals (if it makes them feel good about themselves). I learned two important skills during orientation that have been very useful in my relationship to inmates and navigating issues. One, do no favors, don't have favorites, no special considerations and no buddy-buddy. Those practices are the shortest routes to being conned and blindsided. For example, if you don't have enough of a material or anything else for every inmate in attendance then don't give some and leave others out, except it is purely by random distribution through open display, or first come first served that's plainly clear to all. If the directive clearly says no or don't on any issue, then that's the case: No or Don't. Don't make any exceptions, waivers, or special considerations for certain persons unless you are prepared to do the same for everyone. You open yourself up to complaints and grievances for giving to some and saying no to others. You will have a hard time explaining or justifying why you treat one inmate different than another inmate. To be sure there's wisdom, research, and stories behind every directive even when it sounds harsh, inhumane, or unreasonable to outsiders.

The second lesson I learned is when in doubt or sounds like pushing the envelope, to always say “No” first, with a promise to further check the directive on the issue or speak to a superior before a final decision. The principle is that it is easier to change a “No” to a “Yes” with no animosity than attempting to change a Yes to a No after further consultation with the directive or supe-

rior. You'd be shocked how even the most cool-headed inmate would give you a hard time going back on an earlier or hasty "Yes" to his request. I sometimes carry this technique too far or make a joke of it. For example, before the inmate finishes stating his request, I may cut in with my reply, "The answer is No but please continue, you might be able to change my mind on it." Some will blurt out in anger that if I have already said no before understanding the request it is unnecessary for them to tell me anything further. This is okay with me, because anyone who is so easily put off by such a lighthearted joke has no legitimate case to start with. Those who know me, and how I make jokes, and those with legitimate requests will nonetheless make their case. In fairness, possibly to avoid, preempt or minimize litigations, the directives have not been unkind or unaccommodating to inmates in many respects⁵ that for a chaplain to attempt bending rules is at best, simply unnecessary, and at worst, akin to an act of insanity that's suicidal to his/her career.

Some chaplains understand their roles as advocates for inmates. Many inmates also expect chaplains to play the role of advocates for them. In many instances, I understand my role not as an advocate but as a liaison officer. I always challenge it if any inmate/staff intends to give me the label of an advocate. I jokingly say, "We don't do favors in this department; we do our jobs." They often reply in style, "Then do your job as a chaplain." To me, there's nothing for me to advocate for. If the directive makes provision for it, then it's yours without questioning. Most staff will not knowingly stand in the way of the directives. However, if it is true that anyone is, I can then take it up to speak with such a person. If there's no provision for it in the directive, then, sadly, I'm the bearer of bad news. Chaplains don't make the rules; we implement the directives from Albany. Disappointed by this some inmates would attempt to castigate the chaplain, saying things like, "You are just one of them; you are not different after all; you are part of the administration." They see the administration as restrictive and inconsiderate. Unapologeti-

5. I admit that this perception might be the result of my Nigerian background. Compared to prisons in Nigeria and treatment of nonpolitical prisoners in Nigerian prisons inmates in US are accorded five-star treatment.

cally, I make it clear that while I empathize with them and try to understand and help, I'm nonetheless a team player with the administration. One of the roads that had led many into incarceration was that they'd been raised to believe that they were the center of the universe, that the world revolved around them and danced to their whims, and the systems owed them. The period of incarceration was therefore the first time they received a No and whined and threw tantrums, but, rather than getting their ways, their condition worsened.

Though locked away from family and the neighborhood, the inmate is still a son, a father, grandfather, an uncle, a nephew, and sibling to family members outside of the jail. Maintaining that connection to the family is crucial for the inmate's survival in the system and for reentry after release from prison. The chaplain is the link between the inmates and their family members. When there's an emergency or good news, such as childbirth, in the family and a family member calls the jail, such calls are redirected to the chaplain on duty. The chaplain usually calls the inmate to his office to relay the message, which, in most cases has to do with a death in the family or someone sick in the hospital on their dying bed. As a shepherd, it is his/her role to break the bad news sympathetically and provide immediate pastoral and emotional support. After the inmate is composed enough for conversation with family, the chaplain puts a call to the inmate's family so the inmate can speak directly with the family member who had called the prison. Before sending him back to his dorm, the chaplain may inform the CO in the inmate's dorm of the sad news he's received so the CO can keep an eye on him and provide further care and assistance.

In most cases it is enough for the chaplain to call the dorm and tell the CO that he or she needs to see the inmate and asks the CO to send the inmate to the chaplain's office with a pass. However, some dorm COs are very territorial—if I may use the word. They insist on having the information about the death or grave illness and what family member is affected, which is the reason why the chaplain wants to see the inmate who is not on any call out⁶

6. A call out is a formal notification for an inmate to report to a certain place, at a certain time.

. The officer is then instructed to never give the impression to the inmate that the CO knows why the chaplain wants to see the inmate. By directive, the chaplain should be the first facility employee to break the news to the inmate in the privacy of the clergy's office. In extreme cases, some overzealous rookie COs will still be reluctant to send the inmate—because the inmate is not on a callout. The chaplain is thereby forced to call the area sergeant who supervises the CO, who then instructs the CO to comply.

If necessary, based on the chaplain's judgment, the bereaved inmate may be exempted from school and vocation for a couple of days to help the grieving process. If the case is bad and the inmate is emotionally shattered, the OMH—office of mental health, may be informed of the case to keep an eye on the inmate. One of the roles of the chaplain is to process and facilitate funeral trips for viewing in a funeral parlor/chapel or process the trips to the hospital for a deathbed visit to an inmate's close family members. All such trips are within the State of New York—any part of the State. To confirm death or imminent death reports and process details regarding those incidents requiring transporting inmates for a viewing or memorial service, the chaplain serves as the liaison between the inmate/facility and the outside. Such outside sources may include the Police precincts, in some cases, the hospital/hospice, funeral home, church or mosque where the viewing or funeral service is taking place. For deathbed visit, viewing or funeral services, inmates are transported to approved places, such as, a funeral home, hospital, nursing home or hospice, church or mosque, but not to open public places such as, parks, gardens, burial grounds, ocean fronts, etc.

The relatives that the facility will transport an inmate for funeral or deathbed visit, according to the directive, are father/mother, legal guardian, child, brother, sister, half-brother, half-sister, spouse, grandparent, grandchild, ancestral uncle, or aunt. Currently, there are no visits for in-laws, cousins, nephews, great grandparents, stepbrother, stepsister, and stepparents. Again,

They are published daily. The call out for next day is usually published and available for distribution, latest by 12 pm of the day before so that both the inmate and the dorm CO know where a particular inmate is supposed to be and at what time during that day.

all trips are within New York State only.

Sometimes, it is the other way around. An inmate dies while still under our custody, care, and control. A chaplain plays a prominent role in informing the family, preparing official documents for transporting the body—if the family intends to claim the body of the deceased, or arranging a funeral in prison, if body of the deceased inmate is not claimed. This is a sensitive part of the work and from time to time directives change and procedures are modified. We must go through a list of next-of-kin, emergency contacts, prior DIN numbers, immediate family contact info – spouse, parent, child, sibling, etc. that can claim the body or receive the information. This is not always easy, because some inmates have lost all contacts with the outside for years, with no phone call or letter or visit from family members and friends. Every stage and step is documented (in a chronological order), including phone calls, certified mail with return label, outside sources like the nearest police precinct contacted to help find a next-of-kin, etc. This is to show good faith, due process, and transparency that no stone was left unturned in efforts to find a next-of-kin. It is also to forestall the possibility of a family member suing the department several years after the inmate's burial that he/she had not been properly informed of the demise of the inmate.

When the chaplain calls the CO in a dorm and asks the CO to send a particular inmate to the chaplain's office with a pass, the walk from the dorm to the chaplain's office, for that inmate, could be the most agonizing of his life. Unless the chaplain has specifically told the CO to let the inmate know he's wanted not for a family emergency but for a different reason, the inmate usually arrives at the chaplain's office sweating, with his mind full of wildly ranging anxious thoughts, "What happened? Who died?" For inmates, a call to the chaplain's office is not always a welcomed invitation. It is usually indicative or conclusive of a death, or imminent death due to a grave illness in the family. Though not frequently, the chaplain sometimes delivers good news. I've had several opportunities to tell an inmate that he's the father of a newborn child, and that the baby mother and child are doing well. It is also a piece of good news when I have the privilege of telling an inmate that a sick

family member had recovered and returned home from the hospital.

A Typical Day for a Prison Chaplain; Some of What a Chaplain does and how he Functions: From Both the Secular and Spiritual Standpoints

The Secular Standpoint

On one hand, on the natural plane, a prison chaplain's work is like a firefighter's work. The firefighters sit in their office common room, drinking coffee, playing cards, and telling jokes until a 911 call comes in. Then they jump into action in a well-choreographed, well-rehearsed fashion. On most days, it's the same with the prison chaplain. She sits in her office reading a book, or Bible, updating her call out, responding to inmates' letters and outside letters/packages from the mailroom that came in that day, preparing a packet for the upcoming events of any group she supervises, counseling an inmate who's just been notified of a death or grave illness in his family, following up and placing calls to funeral homes, hospitals, and inmate's family so she may complete a death/grave illness notification form, drinking coffee and meditating until the phone rings. Then she jumps into action. Some days the phone never rings; other days the phone keeps ringing incessantly and she keeps running here and there all day trying to put out one fire after another. The chaplain has other administrative duties and conducts daily rounds. She doesn't sit down all-day doing paperwork, just waiting for the phone to ring.

Some of the functions and duties of a prison chaplain include the following:

1. He's not just a chaplain to those of his faith; he's a chaplain to every inmate and staff. Staff members also need pastoral care from the facility chaplains because they also fall sick or die, and they have family members who are terminally sick or die. When there's an inmate's death, both staff and inmates who know the deceased often need some services from the chaplain.

2. The chaplain helps to provide or facilitate worship in the inmates' faith practice. There are 4 chaplains in my facility: Protestant pastor, Catholic priest, Jewish Rabbi and Muslim Imam but we cater to all religious needs of all religions recognized by the DOCCS. The chaplain leads worship services in his own faith tradition. The chaplains may seek volunteer ministers from outside to attend to the needs of a religious group, or to assist during his faith's worship service. Also, an approved inmate facilitator may lead the group studies/services. An inmate may attend service and worship only with the religious body under which he is registered in DOCCS records. Religious gatherings are voluntary and by call-outs, not mandated. Upon his request, an inmate may be offered three guest visits to a different religious service he intends to investigate or explore. Change of religion is permitted once a year. Some inmates do change religion more than once, some back and forth. The chaplains help to process the change of religion form.
3. Every approved religion has a yearly Family Day Event, with special religious menu, where family members can worship and celebrate with the inmates. The chaplain adviser assigned to supervise the group helps to make the arrangement, including processing visitation formalities for the inmates' family guests.
4. The chaplain keeps an inventory of all religious items used by all the groups he oversees and advises. All religious materials, statutes, shrines, books, Bibles, grocery items, etc. coming from the outside into the jail must come in through an approved gate-pass. The chaplain also generates a gate-pass for any item or electronic equipment that's broken and needs to be taken out of the facility and removed from the chaplain's list. Some items and equipment, such as "class A" tools, in the chaplain's custody are kept under double lock and daily double log in/log out system.
5. The inmate, while incarcerated, is still a son, father, uncle, or nephew to those outside. The chaplain serves as liaison officer and

helps to facilitate ongoing connection with inmates' family, especially in times of crises, such as, death in the family or terminally sick family member.

Since 2007, inmates have been limited to one change of religion a year, according to the directive. As mentioned earlier, some inmates change religion more than once during their incarceration. Some change their religion to Jewish or Rastafarian to avoid eating the regular meals, which are served to the general inmate population and partake of the special (religious) menu that these two groups have. One or two religions—which shall remain nameless—are considered protective in the jail. Therefore, inmates from other religious backgrounds often change to those, for protection. However, many do change back to their family religion prior to reentering society. The sad part is that if an inmate is deceased while incarcerated, and his remains are not claimed by the family and DOCCS has to do the burial, such an inmate will be buried according to the last official religion on DOCCS record, which may be different from his family religious beliefs.

Religious designation becomes extremely important if an inmate is deceased while incarcerated, because some religions do not favor an autopsy. However, in some cases, to ascertain the true cause of an inmate's death, families have requested an autopsy even when an autopsy is considered a violation or contrary to the inmate's family religion. The release of information and the remains of a deceased inmate to the next of kin is prioritized in this order: surviving spouse, adult children, father or mother, grandchildren, brothers or sisters, aunts, or uncles.

“The following religious groups were active in 2017 in my facility: Asatru (Odinist), Buddhist, Greek Orthodox, Hindu, Islam, Islam-Shi'ite, Jehovah Witness, Jewish, Nations of Gods and Earths, Nation of Islam, Native American, Native, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Santeria, and Wicca (17 different groups). As a team, we—the four chaplains—were involved in more than 400 Inmate Family Grave Illness/Death Notifications (for the fourth year in a row.) Volunteers continue to be

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an important part of our team ministry. Approved volunteers regularly assisted the chaplains with the Protestant, Jehovah Witness, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Islamic faith traditions. We averaged more than twenty religious' callouts per week, for a total of more than 1,000 callouts for the calendar year. We hosted more than 60 special events that included meal considerations.”⁷

We do not have the Family Reunion Program or provision for conjugal visit in our facility. None of us chaplains perform weddings for inmates who plan to wed during their incarceration, for different reasons. I, for conscience sake, always hold counseling sessions with couples before I agree to perform the wedding marriage ceremony. This is for the sake of helping, as much as possible, to prepare adequately the couple for a healthy married life beyond the wedding day. Either in prison or society, a lasting, happy marriage is something that's never guaranteed, even with countless premarital counseling sessions. I usually ask for a minimum of two sessions, but it can be extended to four sessions if the couple needs further help and preparation. I do not, therefore, perform weddings for inmates because a counseling session with the inmate and his bride-to-be is not feasible. The Catholic priest also does not perform weddings for inmates because the marriage cannot be consummated here in the facility, as required in the Catholic Church. It's the same reason of not being able to consummate the wedding that the Jewish Rabbi does not perform weddings. Additionally, the Rabbi will perform only Jewish-to-Jewish wedding ceremonies. For the Imam, at least one partner must be a Moslem. Happily, a Justice of the Peace periodically comes around to perform the wedding ceremonies for our inmates.

7. This paragraph is an extract from the 2017 yearly report from the ministerial department submitted (on January 5, 2018) by our indefatigable coordinating chaplain, Deacon Steve Young, to our sagacious Deputy Superintendent of Programs, Marie Hammond. (Just know you both owe me for the adjectives.)

The Spiritual Standpoint—Joshua 1:1-3

On the other hand, on the spiritual plane, a chaplain's work is like Joshua's call and assignment in the Old Testament. "After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord" (Jos. 1:1), Joshua, Moses' successor, got his assignment and marching orders from God. God told Joshua, "Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them" (1:2; emphasis mine). I want to call attention to seven things in this verse. First, Joshua's mandate was urgent. God said, "Now!" Meaning, instant, immediate. There's no time to waste. The chaplain's mandate is always an urgent affair, every day. It is a NOW-job. The task of the chaplain is every day's urgency, every day's emergency, and every day's crisis. Everyone who calls on the chaplain believes his own case is more urgent, more critical, more pressing than the other person's and therefore demands immediate attention. That's the call, like the firefighters' duty. Second, "Now therefore" is a follow-up thought, a phrase that connects to something prior, implying that something had happened or been said, previously to Joshua. As the old preacher usually quizzed, comically, "What's the "therefore" there for?" The "therefore" was the call and anointing of Joshua and transference of leadership and authority to Joshua that had taken place previously at the laying on of Moses' hands. "Now Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him," (Deut. 34:9; Num. 27:18-23). Chaplains dare not go without the divine mandate and authorization, attested to by the clergy's ordination—usually performed through the laying on of hands—and other credentials.

Third, Joshua was commanded and encouraged to arise. In like manner, the chaplain's daily spiritual assignment is to arise, to get up, and to get going, despite whatever is going on around. The chaplain cannot take his cue from the environment, which is often negative and toxic. He must be able to rise above that into another level where he is the light that brightens the surrounding and changes the atmosphere. The chaplain's greatest resource is the ability to tap the power that's resident within him to encourage himself to keep moving, rather than looking outside for motivation, encouragement,

and affirmation. Fourth, to Joshua, God said, “Go...” Go is one word, a verb, and an action word, that’s loaded with possibilities, risk, adventure, pain and stress. God never says, “Go” to anyone to whom He has not previously said, “Come!” Check it out: Moses, Joshua, all the Old Testament prophets and Jesus’ Disciples, all first heard and obeyed the “Come” imperative before receiving the “Go” mandate. In divine set up God never sends a person, or says go, without first saying, “Come.” We cannot obey the “go” mandate until we first have heeded the “come” invitation. Come is an invitation to communion, fellowship, and discipleship, without which the man or woman of God is empty, void, and hollow. To “come” is to abide, dwell with, or dwell in. To “come” is also to engage, to link up with, to relate, to befriend and become one with the Source of the mandate. Both go and come are movement words; one moves towards the Source for empowerment, the other radiates to others in service.

Fifth, the mandate was for Joshua to go “over”, not under. Semantics? I don’t think so. Not when you consider the opposite, which is to “go under.” Even in the harshest pressure of life, the chaplain never forgets that his call is to go over. Indeed, he’s destined to go over, not under. That’s why, in the Bible, we are called over-comers, not under-comers. In the last Book of the Bible, Revelation, again and again, the resurrected Lord Jesus held out promises of reward “to him who overcomes,” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26). Paul, the apostle, even says, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Rom. 8:37). To be “more than conquerors” goes beyond winning, overcoming, or conquering. One preacher says it means “winning big or by landslide”, another preacher says it means “conquerors report to us.” From within and without, many may be the pressure on the chaplain but he’s fighting from victory, not for victory, because the victory has been won and secured already. His Master has won the war; his assignment is the mop up exercises in the battles and skirmishes.

Sixth, Joshua was to go over this Jordan, with the people of God, into the Promised Land. “This Jordan”, was a specific task, the immediate obstacle. In like manner, the chaplain may be bombarded by many pressing needs and

tasks, but he must have the discernment to focus on “this Jordan,” this one task for now. Joshua’s task was to “go over this Jordan” with the people in his charge. In the same vein, the chaplain, having received his mandate and help from God, embarks on leading the people under his custody and care to “go over”, across to the other side of the flooded “River Jordan.” Symbolically, the “River Jordan” is any barrier, hindrance, or obstacle before the people on their way to the Promised Land. At every stage of the journey, the chaplain hopefully and confidently marches on; believing that God’s promise to Joshua is the same promise of God to him. God said, “Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you,” (v. 3). While the chaplain is not domineering, he is territorial, nonetheless. He has claimed every square inch of the facility as his own, and every soul in the facility as under his umbrella of shepherding. When he says, “I’m chaplain”, he means, “I’m here for you.”

Crossing the river Jordan was the first decisive miracle of Joshua, and it was what defined and established him as the next leader of the Israelites. As chaplains, we have learned to see God in every situation and in everything; therefore, we see everything as miraculous, as a God-moment, as Kairos⁸ [Greek] moment—a propitious moment for decision or action. We know that the little victories along the way are building our spiritual muscles and confidence for the next battle ahead. There are no accidents in a chaplain’s day, only divine synchronicities (or divine incidences). For, “The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord” (Psa. 37:23).

Lastly, Joshua’s assignment was not like a coach’s—no offense to coaches. A coach trains, develops, motivates, and builds the team but stays outside of the playing field. As his team engages their opponents, he may continue to yell out instructions, but he never gets into the trenches in the heat of the tournament. Only his pride is hurt if his team loses; he does not suffer any physical injury or concussion. Joshua’s assignment was also not like a signpost, that gives direction, or a travel agent who books your flight, hands you

8. In the New Testament, “*kairos*” means “the appointed time in the purpose of God,” the time when God acts. In English, it is a time when conditions are right for the accomplishment of a crucial action: the opportune and decisive moment.

the ticket and wishes you safe journey. No, Joshua was a fighting soldier in the trenches, strategizing, leading the battles and fighting. His role was like a tour guide or personal bodyguard. The tour guide or body guard gets into the boat, bus or taxi with you, keeps you company and makes the journey with you even as he shows and explains historical landmarks to you, or as he warns and protects you from danger. Joshua was one of them, one of the people making the journey to the Promised Land, which was their common goal. In like manner, the chaplain does not sit in the comfort of his office giving instructions; he gets in the trenches, he's a part of the fighting army. He understands our interdependence and human connectedness to each other. He leads by example in the fight to claim the Promised Land. He scouts the horizon, advocates, protects, nourishes, motivates, educates, or, in one word, shepherds. His ultimate goal is to be and do what the Shepherd is and does for the sheep in Psalm 23.

Not that any human chaplain can truly fulfill the role of the shepherd as in Psalm 23. However, it is the chaplain's ultimate aspiration. Scripture is replete with the idea that Yahweh was the great Shepherd of Israel who led Israel out of Egypt "like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron" (Psa. 77: 20), as well as their Shepherd at other times in their history (Gen. 49:24; Psa. 80:1, 95:7, 100:3; Ezek. 34:31). It was Yahweh's great delight to refer to the leaders of His people as shepherds and bitter disappointment when they failed to live up to that caring role (Num. 27:16, 17; 2 Sam. 5:2; 1 Chron. 17:6; Psa. 78:70-72; Jer. 50:6; Ezek. 34:2-10). The Lord, the Great and the Good Shepherd, works in and through His under-shepherds, the pastor or chaplain. An under-shepherd is defined as a lower-ranking shepherd who works under another shepherd. With this analogy to Psalm 23, I do not believe I am raising the bar. Rather, I believe I am shining light on the bar. The One who said, "I AM the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11, 14) is the Bar. In our relationships and the discharge of our duties, we aspire to get as close as possible to the Bar. Since the Psalm depicts and foresees a partnership between God and the chaplain, allow me the liberty to insert the chaplain in Psalm 23, verses 1 to 4, below.

Psalm 23:1-4 (A Psalm of David).

1 The Lord (chaplain) is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

2 He (the chaplain) makes me to lie down in green pastures;

He (the chaplain) leads me beside the still waters.

3 He (the chaplain) restores my soul;

He (the chaplain) leads me in the paths of righteousness

For His (God's) name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil;

For You (God and the chaplain) are with me;

Your (God's) rod and Your (God's) staff, they comfort me.

“The Individual is Important” Dele Ijagbulu⁹

As a personal philosophy or guiding principle, from the beginning of my chaplaincy, I decided I would always make the effort, on the same day of receipt, to reply to all letters addressed to me, or the Protestant chaplain, as well as any generic letter that came to the chaplains' office, that was not religion-specific and not requesting the attention of a particular supervising chaplain. It was my way of affirming the policy of my friend, trailblazer Christian marriage counselor in Nigeria, the late Reverend Dele Ijagbulu, “The Individual is Important.” Dele Ijagbulu espoused that phrase as the cornerstone and motto of his counseling ministry. In a few letters from inmates, it was difficult to decipher the request or issue that was being raised, or what was agitating the inmate's mind, because such letters were nothing more than unfocused complaints, rants, and harangues on paper. In those few cases the best line of action was to call down the inmate and listen to him. Surprisingly, it always turned out that the one-on-one chat, which the inmate might not

9. Dele Ijagbulu was a friend, brother, colleague, and mentor on another level. He was one of the counselors in the Scripture Union Youth Camp, which I attended in Easter 1972, when I gave my life to Christ. He was a curious lifelong learner and ever-evolving researcher, pioneer, people person, and risk-taker for the Kingdom.

have expected, was all that the inmate needed to clear his head. Most times, they came in apologizing for their language and pointless rambling.

For example, I got a letter of pages upon pages infused with scriptures and mostly uppercase letters in a bulging envelope from a white, male inmate in his seventies who was recently transferred to our facility. He had a 71 DIN number, meaning he'd been jailed for 50 years (1971-2021), serving life sentence for rape and gruesome murder of his victim. I couldn't read past three pages. I called him down to hear him out. All he wanted to do in those pages was to introduce himself to me. It could be summarized in four sentences: "Protestant chaplain, I am here now, under your purview. I do read my Bible—as you can see. I know many Protestant chaplains in DOCCS, both serving and retired, who can tell you about me. It's been a long journey; I have a story to tell." That he hadn't learned brevity in his letters was an understatement because he could as well be the poster child for long windedness when given opportunity to speak. The following day the superintendent gave me the letter the same inmate had written to him and asked me to follow up. If I had complained my letter was bulky I felt sorry for the superintendent because he probably had more Bible verses quoted and underlined in his letter of many pages than the superintendent had read from the Bible in a long time. I called him down again. Still under a rude shock in the new environment, all he wanted to convey to the superintendent could be summed up—which I actually asked him to do for me—in few sentences. In his words: "Superintendent, this place is different! I can't believe what I'm experiencing here. I've been housed in many jails. I want you to know that God is watching. God is the Judge that will judge everything and everyone." I promised the superintendent that I would keep an eye on the seventy-something year old man.

The habit of promptly replying to each mail turns out to be a good practice, because one commodity inmates have in surplus supply, a luxury which you and I do not have, is time. They are not encumbered or in any way bothered by those day-to-day activities, events, assignments and relationships that compete for, distract or take up the hours of our day. Such as, commut-

ing to work, grocery shopping, helping with the kids homework, shoveling snow or mowing the lawn, attending to a spouse's needs, traffic jam, hustling and working a second job to pay rent, credit card debt, car loan, electricity, phone, and other bills, answering phone calls from family and friends. Without these encumbrances, the inmate has plenty of time, than you and I do, to meditate, brood over anything he chooses to focus, plan, and device a scheme on. Writing is not just a means of communication for inmates; it is a pastime, a brain exercise that provides a form of engagement, a measure of control and autonomy. For that reason, they will keep on writing, again and again, sometimes mailing the same-worded letters to each chaplain on the same issue until they know they've been heard, or that their case is receiving the proper attention.

Writing grievances is a way inmates flex their muscles and defend their rights. The aggrieved inmates want to prove to the staff, CO or civilian, or even the administrative executive, that they've read the directives and know their rights, which, to them, the staff or a department of the jail being grieved has violated. They sometimes spend some hours and days researching in the law library, consulting with fellow inmates to build and establish their case. The ultimate goal of a grievance is to go to court and be awarded monetary compensation. Unfortunately, even when the grievance lacks any merit, is based on misinterpretation of the directive or not rooted in any directive, and does not pass the test of common sense, such a grievance still has to go through the process and be answered; wasting everybody's precious time. A pointless and baseless grievance that's plain to every reader as nothing more than venting anger on paper from a disgruntled, dissatisfied inmate unhappy with a decision which is the result of his own negligence, that you wouldn't want to dignify with further attention, still has to pass from hand to hand and be responded to. Naturally, that's one part of the job I detest and cannot stomach. I cannot remember being grieved more than one or two times—maybe more (many thanks to selective memory), even in those cases, I'm thankful that the coordinating chaplain took it upon himself to answer them for me. (He's the best.)

Taking a cue from Rabbi Gulack, I have several form letters for a variety of occasions and requests from inmates. When those form letters do not specifically address an inmate's issue I have a memo template to type in a one-line or one-short-paragraph reply. What always surprises me is how inmates keep those correspondences. If anyone has an issue with my reply, or wants to follow up, he comes to my office with the letter in his pocket. Sometimes, even when an entirely different and unrelated matter has brought them to the chaplain's office they come in with the letter, which might be weeks, or even months old, to establish that we aren't strangers to each other. Talk of knowing their way around! I also have a form letter titled: "Gratitude and Thanks for Your Monetary Donation to the Church," which I mail weekly to inmates who have donated money to the Protestant community during Sunday services, using the disbursement form, which serves as the "offering plate" for transfer of money in the prison. Yes, inmates keep those donation acknowledgment letters, too. Some inmates, especially those inmates craving approval, regard and save the letters as a testament to their good behavior. Guess what, if I send for a Protestant inmate who has requested something that borders on asking for favors, not infrequently, he shows up in my office with those letters to prove his commitment to the Protestant congregation—and to my ministry as well.

Indeed, the individual is important. I'm thankful that my late friend and dear brother in Christ, Dele Ijagbulu, had planted that consciousness in me. How we perceive each other and how we understand humanity in general determine how we relate and respond to one another. For example, I took a class of middle school students on a science field trip in 2006. It could have been to the Botanical Gardens in Brooklyn or the Central Park in Manhattan. A group saw a homeless man, sitting in a secluded corner surrounded by all his worldly goods. With excitement they beckoned to me, waving feverishly, "Mr. O. Come! A bum! Come; see a bum! Mr. O. quick, hurry up!" I slowed my pace to register my disinterest as I approached the spot and looked. "No, that's not a bum," I countered, "that's a man with broken dreams." I tried to walk away. "No, Mr. O. he's a bum. Look! Just look, he's a bum." I said,

“No, he’s not a bum.” Thinking I could turn it into a teachable moment, I continued, “Fifteen, twenty years ago when he moved to New York City he had come with big dreams and plans to make something worthwhile of his life but things didn’t work out as he had planned. It could happen to anyone. You are looking at a man with shattered dreams. He’s like a bird with broken wings.” “He’s a bum! Mr. O. You don’t understand,” they were eager to correct and tutor their science teacher who was an African and immigrant and therefore unfamiliar with city life and city lingo. They continued to yell with excitement as if they had discovered a treasure. We had seen the same man with different set of eyes. To those preteens and early teenagers, the man was a spectacle, and they couldn’t get enough glimpse of him. To me, however, he was like the man in Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) who had been robbed of his livelihood, battered, bruised, bleeding, and left to die while the world passed him by on the other side. I saw an *Imago Dei* (“image of God”) marred by vicissitudes of life; they saw a derelict.

Seeing with different set of eyes happens everywhere. The way we see and perceive one another will color our response to one another. For example, one teacher sees a dirty, scrawny, poverty-stricken boy with limited future sitting in her classroom and treats him that way. Proudly, she numbs her conscience by reasoning within herself that she cannot afford to waste her saliva on a boy who has no future, failing to realize that poverty is a societal disease, not a crime. Another teacher sees past the dirty veneer into the untainted spirit of the same boy. Moreover, he could see in the same scrawny, dirty boy untapped possibilities and hidden potential, as well as the intangible presence of the little boy’s village: family, extended family, dads, moms, siblings, aunts, and uncles all rooting for the six-year old boy as the one who’s likely to fulfill their collective dreams and aspirations for a deliverer. While he’s teaching the boy, he treats and responds to him differently because he’s aware he’s also nurturing the hopes and dreams of “the village” whose ghost is present in the class with the boy. If the boy sinks, the village sinks with him; if the boy rises, the village is lifted. In the same vein, the dentist who believes modern humans are animals of the highest hierarchy in the animal kingdom will care

less when he pulls out an infected tooth from John Doe, because he's just working on an animal. Another dentist who believes his patient, John Doe, is a divine soul and God's masterpiece will be careful as he works on God's image bearer. It all boils down to our belief system about humanity.

In prison, we deal with broken dreams and shattered lives. In the story of each inmate is the story of a village that's dysfunctional, embarrassed, disappointed, deprived, deflated, defeated, and desperately in need of hope, salvation, redemption, a deliverer, and empowerment. It is my daily prayer, before leaving home for work, that God may enable me to see past the broken humanity marred by crime into the unlimited possibilities and restoration that the grace of God affords to each of us, and to treat each person as I would if that person were Jesus. Jesus had said, "inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matt. 25:40).

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kgs. 19:9, 13)

"What are you doing here?" God asked Elijah, twice. That's the question I have asked myself, many times. What am I doing here, as a chaplain in DOCCS?¹⁰ I'm glad I've found some answers with which I am happy. A chaplain finds room in the correctional system to do pastoral care ministry, to represent God, or a system of beliefs. For most of us in the system, chaplaincy is the second, third or fourth career change, which implies that many of us bring to table the benefit of age, experience, decorum, expertise and professionalism. As a chaplain, I know who I am, whose I am, and whom I represent. I am also cognizant of who sent me here, who opened the door for me. I am employed by the State of New York but assigned by God to that post. God gave me the benefit of certain training, a set of skills and ministry gifts. God opened the door for me—out of many other qualified persons—to secure the position. It is up to me, as I discharge my duties, to be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16). Although I am an "ambassador for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20) by calling, I never forget that somebody in flesh and blood signs my paycheck. My immediate allegiance goes to that person,

10. Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, (DOCCS).

or system, while my ultimate allegiance belongs to God. Most workplaces, including DOCCS, do not demand or promote illegal and immoral principles—at least not in print. Hello? Let's not get things twisted here; no one pays me to say or write anything. That's one department in which I am my own CEO. Besides, one of the Ten Commandments, says, "You shall not bear false witness" (Exo. 20:16), and I dare not. I speak and write as an insider.

Yes, chaplains do advocate for inmates in the few gray areas that are open to different possible interpretations of the directive and are, therefore, in the end, subject to the discretionary preference of the higher-up staff. That's when a chaplain may plead or advocate moving the needle in favor of compassion. There are mean-spirited, insecure, and obnoxious employees in every company, civil service, or business organization, and the department of corrections is not exempted. Nonetheless, in fairness, most employees in the prison system—correction officers, senior offender rehabilitation coordinators (SORC), offender rehabilitation coordinators (ORC), classroom teachers, vocational school teachers, librarians, chaplains, cooks and mess hall staff, secretaries and administrative personnel—are sympathetic, compassionate and humane. I know this will be hard for many to believe. The news media, especially the social media outlets of today that are open for every Dick and Harry to live broadcast, feed the public regularly with distorted facts or only broadcast the negative and occasional unfortunate events from behind the barbed wires. Politically motivated and review rating crazy media outlets would stoop low and stop at nothing to be the first to publicize any unverified gossip and negative innuendos from the prisons.

Unbelievable as it may seem, the stern, no-nonsense, bravado external demeanor of most correction officers is the tool many of them employ so they wouldn't be conned or taken advantage of by some con-artist felons. Every prison employee knows that he/she is one grave misstep away from wearing a prison uniform and being cooped up in a cell. The COs must be one step ahead of any questionable and potentially dangerous behaviors by inmates. That's not to say that there are no mean, insecure, and obnoxious correction officers who probably took the job as an avenue for them to vent their anger

against society or project their indoctrinated beliefs of the superiority of their race. Possibly or literally, it's equal percentage—my opinion. That's also not to say that there are no offender rehabilitation coordinators (ORC), classroom, trade and vocational school teachers, librarians, and chaplains who do poor and lousy jobs, who have lost the initial passion to make a difference that had brought them into the system, and are now marking time on the job simply to add years for their retirement benefits.

It's been my privilege for many years to be on one of the NYS Council of Churches certification boards that interview prospective candidates for certification for chaplaincy in the department of corrections, mental health, and psychiatric facilities. I get jittery when we come across Christian ministers, prospective chaplains, who romanticize prison ministry. They think every prison inmate is a misguided soul, a deformed and malformed product of a sick environment. They are happy to defend the prisoner himself or herself as the victim who couldn't have turned out otherwise due to the layers of dysfunctions in his or her circumstances and the poor sociopolitical and economic factors in his or her neighborhood. To them, the job of a chaplain is to embrace them, love them unconditionally—something they've never had all their life, and nurture their broken spirits back to recovery and sanity. Thereafter, it's presto! They're rehabilitated. There's a lot of merit in that point of view but it does not tell the whole story. To start with, by linking crime to poverty and zip codes, they have inadvertently chosen to look the other way or given a free pass to countless heartless high tech crimes committed by people of means who live in gated exclusive zip codes. We cannot get farther in prison ministry until we move from explanation to admission, from passive voice to active voice, from saying, "Mom, it got broken" to saying, "Mom, I broke it." While I admire their belief in the goodness of humanity and the necessity to reengineer the environment that had predisposed some to negative, antisocial practices, I seriously doubt how they could read newspapers or watch network news on TV and miss all the vicious, brutal, racially motivated inhuman acts of violence some miscreants perpetuate against other human beings on a daily basis.

Admittedly, there are many in US jails and prisons today who have no business being there except for a broken, profit-motivated, racially biased judicial and penal system. There are many misguided souls sitting in prisons that otherwise could have been making positive contributions to society, but for being the products of a broken family, shattered community, disadvantaged zip codes, and wrecked school systems. It's also admissible that some are in jail, because they were born and raised in a culture and environment of crimes and criminal activities. To a select few, however, committing crimes and engaging in criminal activities are a battle of wits, a high steroid lifetime adventure, and reality TV entertainment. They commit big, high-stake crimes with big loot and booty that make headlines. They are, therefore, able to hire the best lawyers in the country who help them beat the system, avoid incarceration, or spend a few years in jail, if finally convicted. Those ones, after a few scattered stints in prisons over many years consider themselves better off, since they'd done well for themselves, regardless. They give themselves a pat on the back when they tally up the wealth they'd amassed doing crimes, the lawyers they'd enriched and made famous in the process, the opulent and luxurious lifestyle they'd lived on the streets compared to the paltry time they'd spent in jail. In a broken system, justice is for sale to the highest bidder while the prison beds are reserved for innocent poor souls.

The word, penitentiary, comes from the Latin *paenitentia*, meaning "repentance." A penitentiary is a place a person is sent to make repentance for a crime committed. A state or federal prison is for the punishment and reformation of convicted felons. Incarceration, therefore, is an offer of a second chance, especially, after a period of rethinking, brooding, self-analysis, and introspection. That's the kind of reversal of life goals and attitude that happened to the prodigal son in Jesus' parable in Luke 15:11-32. We read in verses 17-19, "But when he [the prodigal son] came to himself [became penitent or repented], he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of

your hired servants” (Insert mine.) Unfortunately, it doesn’t always work out that way; penitence isn’t the default outcome of incarceration. The Reverend Jay Lewis, retired DOCCS Protestant chaplain and chairman of the board for certification of chaplains I serve on, put it best to one candidate when he said to him, “I agree with you that there many incarcerated individuals who shouldn’t have spent a night in jail or prison. Notwithstanding, the reason you and I can go to bed tonight and hope for a good night rest, is because some individuals are no longer on the streets to continue their menacing, antisocial behaviors and criminal activities but are locked up in prison.”

Classroom Management Skills in Sunday

DAY 2

Worship Service in Prison

I taught for more than a decade in inner-city middle and high schools in rough neighborhoods of New York City. I was a fulltime teacher for about 7 years, and substitute teacher for another 5 years. One paramount skill and tool for teacher’s survival in the classroom is tagged, classroom management.¹¹ I had resigned my fulltime teaching position because I wanted to pursue a dream project, which was, to promote my character education books in schools. The project did not take off due to budgetary issues that limited the purchasing power of interested principals. Before I resigned, I was made to understand that because I was a tenured teacher, I wouldn’t have problem with being reabsorbed back into the system in case I wanted to get back into full time teaching. But it wasn’t that easy.

At job interviews for the position of a science teacher, principals told me they could hire two new teachers on the salary level I was on before my resignation. So, I continued to sub in different schools for another 5 years before I got the position of a prison chaplain, which was the career path I had been praying for. It turned out to be a blessing because while I was subbing; I spent the time discussing with, and learning from, principals and educators

11. Classroom management refers to the wide variety of skills and techniques that teachers use to keep students organized, orderly, focused, attentive, on task, and academically productive during a class.

in different schools and different neighborhoods my project of character education. Subbing in new environments also meant I had to hone my classroom management skills and techniques, such as, having eyes at the back of my head, ability to quickly detect the troublemakers, discern their schemes and forestall them, understand the decoy from the actual scene of action and nip both in the bud, using the attendance sheet, paying attention, listening well and quickly learning the names of potentially volatile students and calling them by names when they least expected. You got one of two predictable reactions from such students. Either, surprised, in shock, "How did you know my name?" or, taken aback, in defiance, "That's not my name!" Anonymity was important to a disruptive student. You took away his power, somehow weakened him once you learned his name. The key to success was the ability to achieve all these in the first five or ten minutes of the class.

In my first year at in the facility, the classroom management skill became handy. My services were kept to one hour. I always told those who wanted more time for Sunday service my philosophy: "If the one-hour service is uplifting, meaningful and resourceful the inmates will hunger for more and come the following Sunday; if it is boring, mind-numbing, and uninteresting, they'll forgive me and still come the following Sunday because I didn't waste their time or took them for granted." The service was like I was still in the classroom dealing with potentially disruptive students.

From the beginning of the service, I was on my feet, my eyes scanning the room, my ears at attention, walking around, until it was time for me to preach. When preaching time came, it was like in the classroom; there could be only one microphone and one speaker at a time, and I had the one microphone and I was the only speaker. Many thanks to the clip-on wireless microphone I had inherited from my predecessor. This gave me the freedom to circulate and move around the room. If lips moved or bodies shifted at an unexpected time, I was on top of it before it escalated. The result? I didn't have gang members, or young people who simply wanted to while away time during Sunday service, or those from the north side who only wanted to use the service call out to meet and hobnob with those from the south side, and

vice versa. Those who came—young or old—wanted to be there, to listen, to worship, to learn, and to fellowship with fellow believers. If I needed to separate some inmates, or move someone to another seating position, or even had to be in your face with any who had no business than disrupt, I did so unapologetically and nipped the problem in the bud.

It didn't matter if you wanted to ask for help from another inmate to find a passage of scripture, or wanted to ask for help in understanding what I was saying, I better not see the lips or hands move in any way, I would be in your face. If I later learned the intention was good, then I made adjustment, but would tell the persons to limit such. This was the reason we started interpreting into Spanish because some inmates I had caught mumbling were trying to help a Spanish-speaking inmate. The Sunday service was our worship hour. It was my classroom, as well as my sacred space, and I defended my turf, thanks to classroom management strategies. Little surprise then that once or twice an inmate had raised his hand to ask question while I was preaching. All eyes turned on him. I recognized his hand and answered his question. Other inmates later told him that no one asked the preacher any questions while he was preaching. He probably saw a teacher in me than a preacher. The next time he raised his hand the inmates sitting by him pushed down his hand. I waved down his hand too, told him to write down his question and talk to me later, to discourage the habit. I could have enforced a no-bathroom rule, that is, "use the bathroom before we start the service, or in the first ten minutes, or wait until the one-hour service is ended," but we had some elderly inmates and those with health issues who needed to use the men's room frequently.

After about one year, I didn't need the stern, strict personae of a classroom teacher in the worship service anymore because it had become the culture that if you didn't intend to gainfully and meaningfully participate in the Protestant service, then never bother to show up, or you could be embarrassed. Even up until now, with less drama to worry about, I rarely sit down; I stay on my feet, worshipping, observing, or preaching, for the duration of the service.

When I met with the Protestant Advisory Committee after the Sunday worship service, I would ask them: What did we do right? How can we

improve on it, or do it, even better? What didn't go well, as planned? What led to its failure? How can we avoid a repeat in the future? Whatever feedback I received, I always commented, "The best was, we did it in one hour!" It was always the highpoint of my Sunday when everything, even on communion Sundays, happened in one hour.

As a side comment: The Protestant congregation is a rich organization due to the faithfulness of the inmate members who regularly, voluntarily, and faithfully give their tithes and offerings to their prison "church." We thereby have the funds, from time to time, to buy musical instruments, amplifiers, cordless microphones, etc. for use in our services. Shortly before the pandemic lockdown, we started having one Sunday in the month—separate from Communion Sundays—designated loosely as koinonia, fellowship hour when we have coffee, coffee cake, and juice, paid for from the Protestant account. I sincerely believe that sharing meals is an integral part of our Christian hospitality, fellowship and witness. If you don't believe that, please read Revelation 3:20, and tell me why Jesus added the last phrase, "eat with him, and he with Me." Because the rest of the verse makes sense—complete gospel truth—without that ending. The question is: Is that piece, that ending, necessary or superfluous, indispensable or redundant? Guess what? The entire service, including singing, praying, preaching, koinonia, still happens in one hour. On those Sundays, I try to work everything within fifty minutes, giving the last ten minutes for mingling, drinking, sharing and snacking. The few extra minutes past the one-hour-time is spent cleaning, mopping and sweeping. We always strive to leave the chapel space cleaner and better arranged than we met it. They make me proud.

"Why are you such a stickler for a one-hour service?" I'm glad you asked. Before the era of YouTube, back in the day when preachers and churches paid for airtime to telecast their service or message on TV, how was it that they were able to edit out, trim off the non-essential time wasters, package a solid one hour service that's inclusive of everything meaningful that they did during the Sunday service? It's because they were intentional, judicious, and prudent. I always ask myself: If I had to pay for a one-hour air time on TV for

my service, what would be essential to justify the money spent, what would constitute a waste of precious money?

Besides, as someone who had spent years in NYC school classrooms, the best practice was to give a mini lesson, of about 15 minutes, to be followed by self-learning, student-centered, reinforcing activities for the students to engage their minds, practice and gain mastery, in small groups or individually, for the rest of the period. True educators at middle and high school levels, make an effort to avoid doing too much of talking and lecturing while students busy themselves taking notes or copying notes copiously, because such practices tend to promote passive learning. It is also my opinion that unless a teacher or preacher can succinctly condense and present a five minute overview of his intended one hour presentation, in a manner understandable to a 5th grader, with less professional terminologies and technical ambiguities, he is just full of hot air. Especially when the topic is a tough one, I often challenge myself to stand in front of a mirror and give a 3-minute summary of my lesson plan or Sunday message, so I don't embarrass myself in public. The teacher's goal (classroom or Bible teacher) is not to impress the students with his wealth of knowledge or expertise on the subject—amateur teachers seek that; rather, his goal is to stimulate learning, by his passion to kindle a like passion, an insatiable interest in the subject, in the students.

We do, however, go beyond one hour on Sundays that I use a DVD telecast of Bishop T. D. Jakes. On those special services we cut off virtually everything else and simply have an opening song, opening prayer, sit, listen, watch, and be blessed. T. D. Jakes is a treat in prison services.

No Smoke Without Fire

As the saying goes, "There's no smoke without fire." Truth be told, there's a personal story behind my sentiment for a one-hour service. It's the Causality Principle, cause and effect, that all real events necessarily have a cause. When I became the first fulltime chaplain of the Protestant Chapel of Christ Our Light, University of Lagos, Akoka, Nigeria, in July 1990, the chapel committee requested a one-hour service, with a short sermon sandwiched between.

(This was the practice in most Anglican or Episcopal congregations in Nigeria). Their emphasis was on “short sermon,” which hurt my pride. They had been using volunteer chaplains—who were ordained ministers from mainline denominations—before I was called to be the chaplain, and they had had the unpleasant and unpalatable experience of some guest ministers preaching (and/or boring them) for too long. What they asked for was a “short sermon” but what I heard was an unsupported indictment: “What’s this unknown fellow going to preach to us that we’d never heard before? We aren’t going to let you waste our time puffing and belching out some nonsense from a university pulpit. By the way, do you realize that we are Anglicans to the core?” In my pride, or youthful exuberance, or hyper spirituality—any of those would suffice—I reminded them that they spent one hour to deliver their lectures to students in the classroom, and sometimes groaned that the one hour was insufficient for them to do justice to the topic or lesson. Not to mention that some had double periods, back-to-back hours, for their lectures. We eventually negotiated for a one and a half hour service. This became the norm or the goal, but it sometimes stretched to two hours. The congregation was forgiving, however, or did not mind this occasional lapses.

Not long after this, some fresh, visionary, university graduates who had been Christian leaders in their college days—like I had been in my time—started some churches in Lagos, Ibadan, and other metropolitan cities in Nigeria. These church planters had no theological training or degrees from seminaries, and they had not been mentored by some luminaries in the ecclesiological community. All they had was a burning desire to reach the time-conscious business and professional communities, up-and-coming tech-savvy individuals, medical and intellectual sectors, men and women in middle-and-upper level social strata for whom, “Time is Money.” Their goal was to provide one hour service that’s inclusive of worship-inspiring contemporary Christian music, personal and intercessory prayers, uplifting and didactic preaching, collection, altar call, announcement, etc. in one hour. They called it, “The Business Model.” They started in rented school auditoriums and dining halls. The attendance was growing exponentially from

Sunday to Sunday. Of course, the influence of positive peer factor, collegiality, and professional networking could not be divorced from their success story. In no time, they were having multiple services in the same venue. The efficiency was superb. The flow from one service to another was seamless and businesslike. They did not use the phrase, “customer service,” but it was in the air, from the hospitality of the volunteers or staff directing traffic and helping with parking, to ushering and seating visitors, provision for childcare and children service, the quality of music and musical instruments, the audio-visuals of presentations, lighting, everything took your breath away. The collection was robust. They soon bought lands and built edifices.

These creative Christian thinkers were fresh graduates, mostly employed in the business, oil, computing and banking sectors who discovered a vacuum, a need, and filled the void. Besides, their outlook was as Evangelical, Charismatic, and Pentecostal as could be; thus embracing all comers. They were independent, Protestant, nondenominational and interdenominational all rolled together. Whenever I considered their success against the backdrop of my reluctance to sign up for a one hour service with the chapel committee, I felt so little and ashamed of myself. Today, I wish I could roll back the hand of the clock to that time when I sat with the chapel committee. If I could have the chance again, I would take back my words and commit myself to a solid one-hour-Spirit filled, and Spirit led service befitting an academic community worshipping in a university chapel. In essence, I am not necessarily a stickler for a one-hour service, even though that’s what I would go for anytime; I am actually striving to convince myself that “It Can Be Done!” Putting it bluntly: I am simply trying to redeem myself by doing it. I regret that I blew the opportunity to prove that, and I don’t want to repeat that mistake again.

As a communicator, I believe the process is more important than the content. Communication is a two-way process of sending and receiving; not just sending (or spewing content) alone. I chuckle when I see overzealous preachers dutifully preaching their entire outline for a 30-minute sermon to an apparently inattentive, uninterested, and distracted audience, harping on Isaiah 55:11, that God’s Word will not return void but accomplish the

purpose for which it was sent; not realizing that the preacher's regurgitation is not necessarily God's Word for the moment. If I noticed unfocused eyes and yawning in my audience in a classroom or church at any time during my presentation, I would either go straight to my 3-minute summary, or change my approach. Yawning and fidgeting qualify as feedback and communication methods from the audience, or supposed listeners. That's one of the reasons I was giving a printed copy of my Sunday messages to those incarcerated individuals in attendance; in case I had to end my message abruptly, but that almost never happened. I also believe that "Brevity is the soul of wit," as Shakespeare penned in Hamlet. The late Pastor John Osteen, father of televangelist Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church, Houston, TX, was quoted as saying, "Blessed are the short-winded for they will be invited back."

My One and Only Deacon

The inmate who had raised his hand to ask a question in the middle of my preaching, bless his heart, like him or hate him, he left an indelible impression on all who knew him. To start with, he was unusual, odd, bizarre, and inquisitive. He was barely literate and had been registered for pre-GED classes. He was the one voice singing off-key with gusto during congregational singing. Always eager to learn, grow and succeed; he signed up for Bible study and Kairos events. He was always there to help anybody, to be of assistance to me during Sunday service, or baptismal service, or help clean my office. He was a good-natured man, very appreciative of any show of kindness toward him, and deeply insightful despite his limited literacy. He had joined the Toastmasters¹² classes in the prison so he could learn to speak in public. He would ask permission to read a scripture during Bible study or service so he could practice reading and public speaking. Every day and every effort he made, in his book, was better than the one before.

When I gave him short passages to read, he would struggle to sound out

12. In Toastmasters, members learn leadership skills by organizing and conducting meetings and completing projects. The projects address skills such as listening, planning, public speaking, motivating, and team building and give members the opportunity to practice them.

each word, and took forever to read a verse. With an inerasable smile glued to his face, he was never bothered if people were laughing at him or having fun at his expense as they watched him struggle. He was loving, lovable, and loved by many, though some took advantage of his credulity and low-level intelligence. To boost his morale, enhance his status, and afford him some protection, I started addressing him as “my deacon.” He loved that. Inmates, even those not belonging to the Protestant community, began referring to him as the chaplain’s deacon. I also added him to the Protestant Advisory Committee, and he became the second life of the party in the group (I was the number 1). For this, some considered him a snitch, the chaplain’s informant. You could not fault the genuineness of his kind spirit and smile, a smile that was like a permanent fixture on his face. He was never shy to ask for help when he needed any.

When he stood to read a short passage and struggled to pronounce the words, a few considered it a waste of time, many thought it was a good gesture and were happy to encourage him to learn to read and grow, majority were happy to be entertained and amused by the way he sounded out the words, and tried to break each word into its syllables. If the service was boring or too serious, he was the side attraction that livened and lightened the atmosphere. You couldn’t help but have an opinion about him. Even his gullibility was endearing. A few saw him as a nuisance or simpleton, many saw him as a soul struggling to grow and needing encouragement, majority saw him as a harmless clown to have around, those who played comparison game were happy they were not in his shoes. In fairness, barring those involved in gang rivalry, inmates were generally kind, helpful, supportive and sympathetic to one another (like comrades), apart from some mean-spirited characters, who were themselves a problem. I was just happy that he found the Protestant community a safe place to be himself, to be vulnerable, to laugh and be laughed at, seek help, and grow. He had been jailed for selling drugs.

It was rare for him to take offense at anything, or anyone, or show sad feelings because he would too quickly brush aside such feelings and make excuses for those who had insulted or abused him. He told us in a Bible study that the

way he dealt with his “haters” was to “kill them with kindness.” I told him to stay with the kindness part, that the killing aspect was a corrupt motive for the kindness, and negation of the kindness itself. As I said before, like him or hate him, you would not easily forget my deacon. An ordained clergyman who had a doctorate degree in ministry, D.Min., and was concurrently the pastor of two flourishing Black churches in New York and New Jersey before his incarceration was also in the congregation, and a member of the Protestant Advisory Committee at the time. So were Danny, the piano wizard, and Blackmon, my clerk (both mentioned in chapter 4). Such was the gamut of the Protestant congregation and its Advisory Committee; the broad spectrum ranged from the barely educated simpleminded inmate, to the doctoral-level educated inmate who had been one of the movers and shakers in the Black community before he was jailed in a high profile case, inclusive of Danny, serving time for an assault, and Blackmon, sentenced for robbery. For me, those were the days—2013/2014—when inexperience was neither a curse word nor synonymous with incompetence. As strange as it may seem, in barely a decade, things have changed drastically in the system. The turnover rate of inmates and staff—both civilian employees and correctional officers is high, leading to different dynamic and storyline from time to time. It could be the law of entropy in action and it could be a case of “the more you look, the less you see.” Who knows?

A Whole New Ball Game

Nevertheless, the teacher's mentality had its downside. A good teacher has high expectations for the students he teaches or supervises, believes in them, and pushes them to greater achievements. These are traits a prison chaplain may cautiously, minimally possess and exhibit to inmates, otherwise, that chaplain is heading for a nervous wreck. It didn't take more than the first couple of Bible studies I led for me to realize that many of those who had signed up for the Bible study and their rookie chaplain lived on different planets, looked at the world through different lenses—one was myopic, the other hyperopic, had different aspirations for the future, and spoke different

languages. That was when the import of this saying dawned on me: “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” Though a novice on the job, I had 40 years of ministry experience, and a Ph.D. in Biblical counseling under my belt at the time; I was ready with the tools and skills for change, but no one could do the work for another person.

It reminded me of an occasion when one of my nephews in the same apartment building in New York was having serious problems in middle school and the mother was advised to seek therapy and professional counseling for him. Frustrated with this, my nephew yelled at me, “Uncle! You have a Ph.D. in counseling! You call yourself a counselor! You can’t even counsel your nephew! It’s all your fault!” “Sorry, nephew, a physician does not gulp down the medication he has prescribed for an ailment with the expectation that his patient will get well thereby. No, the patient has to swallow the medicine, even if it is bitter, if he expects to get better. I don’t sweat to make changes happen in another person’s life, the counselee does. I make commitment and follow-up, but I am not the one who needs to change, or has to work towards the change, you are.” A counselor is like a coach with a roadmap to success, a likely game-winning plan; the serious minded counselee, like the athlete, follows the coach’s instructions, works out the plan, sweats it out in the field of life for his own victory.

I kid you not, I was walking from a bus stop in the jail toward my office, and the inmate, a young man, was walking in the opposite direction from the commissary to his dorm with a bag full of foodstuff he had purchased. I didn’t know him. I always like to make eye contact and exchange pleasantries as warmly as possible. When our eyes locked briefly, I greeted him in my lively, hearty way, “How are we doing today?” “Living the dream; living the dream,” he replied with gusto, grinning from ear to ear, and walked on. I stopped momentarily in my track because I didn’t know how to process that or what to do with that unrehearsed response. What dream was he living wearing a prison uniform? It really baffled me! When I narrated it to my colleague, he suggested the inmate might be high at that time. He could be in another world.

Fast forward to many months after this. I asked a CO how his day was going. He answered me, "Living the dream, living the dream." I laughed hilariously. I then explained to him why I had laughed, that an inmate had given me the same response, and I wondered what dream he was living wearing a prison uniform. The CO gave an explanation I would not forget, which also threw some light on my confusion. The CO said every dream was not always rosy and sweet. He said dream could be a nightmare. He said if you were living your nightmare you were living your dream. He told me he learnt that in the army; that your nightmare might be your dream which you were living. Wow! Technically, living the dream means that someone is living his best life; that he is achieving the goals he wants to achieve; that he has all the material comforts and/or relationships that he wants to have. I also understand that living the dream is an idiom that is sometimes used sarcastically, to mean that one is not actually living ideally. Probably, I had misinterpreted and misjudged the inmate I encountered in the walkway. He might have told me he was living his nightmare or could just be sarcastic. On a second thought, tell me how you could ever have a dull moment in a context where both the CO and inmate are 'living the dream' (or their worst nightmares!)

I don't know if everybody does so, but, in every relationship I am in, I always have certain phrases or sentences, unvoiced, at the back of my mind, either as a working mantra, personal philosophy or just for my own sanity and to help calm my nerves on the job. For example, in the church or ministry in general, my working philosophy, which is the whisper in my head, is: "He is God's image bearer, whatever you do to him, you are doing to God as well." In the office, when a discussion about a coworker who is not in the room is turning negative, the voice in my head is, "Who is the advocate for this person who is not here to speak for himself?" When I am with elementary students, I have this unvoiced, "He could be a future president of the US." That helps me treat a child with dignity. By the way, I address all my students as "Yes, sir" or "Yes, ma," for that reason. For different reasons, I also say, "Yes, sir," "Good morning, sir," or "Thank you, sir," to every Dick and Harry: CO, colleague, coworker, inmate, store cashier, or the unemployed,

homeless living on people's generosity by running errands for the tenants and doing menial chores for the building superintendent. It's one of my survival tactics as a black man in a trigger-happy, "Make America White Again" culture. Unless it is extremely warranted, "I'm sorry, sir," is one phrase I hardly ever say because it suggests admitting culpability—a position you don't want to be cornered in, in this culture.

In middle schools, if a student is inattentive or going off the wall, I calm my nerves by reminding myself, "It's not personal; it's just hormones in action; she'll be the sweet girl again later." In high school, when a student is unruly or acting up, I say, "Be careful; the next time you see him he may be sitting at the Social Security office window to attend to you," or "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." A typical high school clown or Romeo has no idea what he's doing to his own future. As a hospital chaplain, my mantra is, "Every patient (or the patient's family member) is angry at someone or something." He may be angry at himself for being sick; he may be angry with the physicians; he may be angry about his wait time, the lab test, bill, insurance, nurse, hospital room or bed, food, etc.; with that mindset no patient's or family member's reaction or outburst takes me by surprise. For my own sanity, when working with an inmate, even when that inmate is born again seven times, and speaks in tongues till thy kingdom come, the unvoiced which I try not to act upon or project is: "He's not telling the whole truth; he's still hiding something; beware of going out on a limb." That does not make him a liar, and I am not implying that he's a liar. It could mean that he's just being tactful and choosing not to volunteer information unless specifically questioned and cornered. However, for an inmate, tact easily translates as con. Like me or hate me for it, I need that to prevent myself from a nervous breakdown.

Incidentally, this attitude of mine to an inmate's sob story, narrative or plea, is the same posture I have towards teenagers' stories. Regardless of how innocent they appear, and how believable their story is, I cannot help but see teenagers through the lens of my youth, because I was once a sweet, smart, believable, conniving teenager. It could also be the teacher in me that makes

me listen to every tale from a teenager with a grain of salt. However, I might not be far wrong when you read what's said about Jesus in John 2:23-25. It's reported that "Jesus would not entrust [commit, NKJV] Himself to them, for He knew all men... He knew what was in a man," (vv. 24, 25; NIV). The same crowd that had hailed Jesus and shouted "Hosanna" in barely a week yelled out, "Crucify Him!" Unlike omniscient Jesus, I do not know the heart of all men, but I know myself; and I know my heart. I concur with the apostle, when he said, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find" (Rom. 7:18). If an inmate wants me to believe him totally, I make it plain to him that I don't even trust myself completely, one hundred percent. I leave room for human frailty. Only God has my absolute and complete trust.

A subject teacher in the school setting in prison would and should endeavor to raise the bar and set high expectations for the inmates in her classroom, but a prison chaplain cannot afford to set high expectations because the chaplain is dealing with something deeper, greater and more fundamental than academic performance. The chaplain is dealing with a frail human spirit, carnal thoughts, "the flesh", or the Adamic nature, nothing cerebral. Inmates do not come to the chaplain because they need help with reading or a math problem; they come to the chaplain because they are falling apart, low in spirit, and the world is caving in on them. They rarely come asking to see the priest, pastor, imam, or rabbi. Religious or not themselves, the inmates (or staff in time of need) just want to have a chat with a chaplain, the caring, empathetic, spiritual leader of any faith that's available at that time in the facility.

Back in middle schools (in Brooklyn, NY) we spoon-fed the students. We treated and pampered them like babies. We did everything possible to encourage them to study and prepare for exams. Most of my tests were open-book, and that's after going over the very test questions with the students as close as possible to the test date. We helped as much as possible to make sure they passed terminal or Regents exams. The performance of the middle school students was as well a grade mark for their teachers and the school, maybe even more the report card for teachers and school than for the stu-

dents. In high school, however, we expected a level of maturity, ownership, and accountability. It took me time to make the shift and adjust my thinking. While we cajoled middle school students, we expected high school students to be self-motivated.

In middle school, in most cases, the students pay attention in class, do the assigned homework, not for themselves, but as a favor to the teacher. Even if they are not the teacher's pet, they do the teacher's class work and homework because they like the teacher and can perceive that the teacher likes them as well. If they don't like the teacher, and cannot sense that he likes them, he can expect no cooperation. When they are angry with the teacher, they tell the teacher, "I'm not going to do your work anymore." It is in high school that the prospects of rewards, a good job, a future career, competitive spirit, or parent's gifts and privileges for good grades, begin to factor in, in a student's class performance. Your typical high school student is neither too reticent to beg and plead with the teacher for a grade he has not deserved nor too decorous not to fight and argue with the teacher for a grade he believes he deserves but has been denied. The motivating factors for them are the rewards and privileges; they strive to please and make their parents proud of them so they can earn more and more; they act and behave properly so they can be in the good books of those who could be of help and benefit to them. Their bottom line is, "What's-in-it-for-me?" That attitude of teenagers—looking out for number one—is the only praise-worthy definition of selfishness in every parent's dictionary.

Usually two teachers graded a high school student's Regent's test paper. When I first made the move to high school, I would find myself debating and pleading with the co-grader over what he'd marked wrong. Like I had read the student's mind, I would reason with him that maybe the student couldn't put his point across and should be given the benefit of the doubt and awarded at least half mark, if not full mark in a situation where the answer was clearly wrong. In my book back then, a blank page got no marks, but the student earned some credit for putting ink on paper. My partner would remind me that I was no longer in middle school where we awarded grades, to a certain

extent, for the student's good attendance and good behavior than academic performance. I would argue that any student attending a summer school to make up for his deficiency during the school year would most likely never needed a working knowledge of the Krebs' cycle, photosynthesis, or cyto-genesis to earn a living in life (so, what's the point?). I eventually made the shift that high school students were mature enough, should be treated like adults, and should not be given a free pass. Some high school students already had part-time jobs. That was when I got the position of a Protestant chaplain.

For some reasons, with that high school teacher's mentality, I had expected anyone old enough to commit a crime to also act like an adult, behave with some level of maturity and exhibit some rationality in reasoning. I was wrong. Thankfully, in my first year, I was always paired to work with either Imam or Rabbi as my mentors. After an inmate had left my office, I would run to them wondering and shaking my head why anyone would reason the way the inmate had, or why he should expect me to put in more effort to help him than he was putting in for himself. Rabbi or Imam would then remind me that many inmates had not developed cognitively along their chronological age, that if they could reason sensibly as I had expected many would not have ended up in jail, that many were school dropouts with low level rational and decision-making skills, that those who had abused drugs had halted mental development as a result and were actually functioning with a preteen's mind-set in an adult's body, that many had been products of dysfunctional family system to the extent that what others regarded as dysfunctional was normative for them. While this is not true for every inmate, the way to truly help some inmates was to spoon-feed them, like I did in middle school. Also, those days, when the Protestant Sunday service time was delayed because some inmates got into a fight on the walkway after lunchtime, and I looked bewildered over the unreasonableness of the case, the worship area CO, officer G., would remind me, "Rev. don't forget this is prison! What do you expect?" Gradually, I arrived at a place where nothing in jail was surprising anymore; it could be out of the ordinary day-to-day but hardly ridiculous or nonsensical in prison.

Gay¹³, Transgender¹⁴, and Sexual Activity in the Bathroom during Worship Service

Believe it or not, on Sunday, July 31, 2016, two men were caught having an intimate relationship in the bathroom during the worship service under the watch of Mr. Classroom Management, who had two eyes at the back of his head. It was a college-educated inmate, articulate, smooth talker, suave, an opera singer, and voice trainer in society, who was caught having sex with another inmate in the bathroom during my service. The CO observed that two inmates had been in the bathroom for a long time. He looked and noticed four boots by the door. One inmate was housed on the north side and the other on the south side of the jail, unbeknownst to me that they had signed up for the service as their meeting (or mating!) time. They claimed it was consensual. The DSP (bless her heart) teased me and quipped. She said that I was probably preaching too much love; that I didn't make myself clear when I said, "Love thy neighbor."

In my opinion, the number one hot button issue in the church today is sex. My facility is a medium. At any given time in the facility, on the average, about 1/3 of the inmates are incarcerated for robbery, another 1/3 for drug related, and roughly the last 1/3 for sex related offenses. In the Protestant congregation, at any given time, more than 60% of the members are sex offenders, rapists, pedophiles, or sodomites. Don't ask me the reason because I don't understand why it is so. In the Protestant choir/praise team more than 80% if not 90% of my instrumentalists, soloists and skilled musicians were in for sexual offenses. (By the way, they were the same gifted church musicians who were playing instruments, singing, and leading "praise and worship" in the local churches before they exchanged choir robes for prison gowns.) I have more sex offenders than the Catholic group. The Catholic priest worries

13. Gay is a term that primarily refers to a homosexual person or the trait of being homosexual; typically referring to a man.

14. Transgender people, trans for short, are people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were thought to be at birth. When we're born, a doctor usually says that we're male or female based on what our bodies look like.

about gang members, I worry about sex partners. If you take sex offenders from my Protestant congregation, I may have lost about two thirds. However, if you take gang members from the Catholic congregation, they may have lost two-thirds of membership as well. Can anyone tell me why this is so?

At one point in my facility, we had some openly gay and transgender inmates in our population. They were usually housed separately from the general inmate population. Like every other inmate, they wrote me to put them on the call out for Protestant services, and I did. The COs and inmates knew who they were, their sexual orientation and many were uncomfortable around them. In fairness to the inmates, no one objected to their presence in service, though some would not seat near them. Having experienced the worship service, some asked to be put on the Bible study and choir/praise team; and I did. This was when it became uncomfortable, challenging, and problematic. Some inmates left the choir, and some stopped coming to church because they could not sit and worship, watching the visibility these inmates gained when they held the microphone and sang in the choir during church services. I insisted we all had our different issues. Besides, inclusivity and nondiscriminatory practice on gender, race, creed, age, or sexual orientation, was the law in New York State. More importantly, the appropriate questions to ask were: If Jesus visited our jail today, what would Jesus do with these men? Would Jesus snub them or welcome them? Would Jesus defend, shield, and protect them, or would Jesus expose, neglect, and abandon them? I do not wear a WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) bracelet. I never did! However, I often resort to the question when I find myself at a crossroad, especially, on controversial issues.¹⁵

The college educated opera singer had a gift that he wanted to share with the church, and I wouldn't deprive him of that. The trans wasn't so much of a singer but I always insisted I wasn't looking for talents, only availabil-

15. The balancing act of "Speaking the truth in love," (Eph. 4:15) is what builds up the church. "Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it" (Timothy Keller). "Truth without love is brutality and love without truth is hypocrisy" (Warren W. Wiersbe).

ity. Besides, if I didn't put him on the call out it could be misinterpreted as discrimination. First, at Bible study, other inmates wondered how to address him—was he a she or a he? Gladly, he said he was okay with any. The inmates, however, were comfortable seeing him and addressing him as masculine, regardless of the breasts which no one was sure if they were real or stuffed bra. When he walked into the room, with bulging two breast-like shapes on his chest, his hair in ponytail, the feminine gait, the first thought that popped up in your head was: Do we have female inmates in this place? He preferred to be addressed by his first name, which was feminine. He told those who were trying to play the role of a big brother and had wanted to talk him out of "it" that that's who he was under the skin, a female, and that he was taking treatment to achieve his goal. It was a rocky time and it was like I was sticking out my neck for them, protecting them like my babies.

The toll on my time and me was heavy. Because everybody—COs and inmates—felt uncomfortable around them I had to be present in any call outs I had them on, to forestall any hanky-panky. That taxed my schedule to a breaking point. Before they were added to the group, I didn't have to be present at every choir/praise team rehearsal because they were mature men who behaved responsibly and who were also trusted by the COs on duty. However, with the gay and trans members amongst the group, my presence was crucial. After the incident of sexual activity in the bathroom during service, I removed the opera singer and his partner from the Protestant callout. Of course, they were both disciplined, first with cube restriction, and later transferred out of our jail. I called down the trans and informed her (or him)¹⁶ that due to the incident I needed to be extra careful and I wasn't prepared to invest more of my time during rehearsals. I told him I would take him off the choir/praise team but would keep him in the Bible study and service because I would normally be present in these two. He was okay with the arrangement and kept attending services until he returned to society.

16. I chose to stick with he/him (masculine) referring to this inmate throughout this write-up, not out of disrespect or disregard for his gender preference but simply because he was housed in a male prison facility; also, he had said he didn't object to whichever pronoun..

Lessons learned: Since that time, to my knowledge, we've not had openly gay and trans inmates in our facility. If we do, and they ask to be on Protestant call out, I will put them on every call out except the choir/praise team because it took too much time and energy out of me trying to ensure their safety while under my purview. While the incidence of sex in the bathroom was scandalous and disgraceful, it was also a gift, a blessing in disguise. It gave us, the Protestant community, the opportunity to reset and rethink who we were, and who we wanted to be, as a community of Christians. As my pastor in Brooklyn, the Reverend (Dr.) Gary V. Simpson would say, "the church is a place for whosoever but not for whatsoever."

How We Learn, and How We Belong, in a Fast-Changing World

I've had Choir/Praise Team leaders who wanted me to interview and be sure that any inmate who sent me a request to join the Choir/Praise Team was a born again Christian, or of an "acceptable" lifestyle, and not seeking membership for show off, before I added their names. I knew where that was coming from, because I had lived through that when I was a leader of the Redemption Singers in the university (details in chapter 10). Back then we were confronted with the question of whether to allow musicians, especially proficient guitarists, who didn't believe as the core of us did, to join the Redemption Singers, a subgroup of the Student Christian Movement (SCM). To us in the SCM, the question touched on the core of the goal of the group: does the group exist to minister the gospel in songs for soul winning, or to perform Christian or religious songs to entertain an audience? Also, what makes a song (or a singing group) truly Christian, is it the lyrics of their songs or the devotional life of the singers and instrumentalists?

While I appreciated the fact that the inmate Choir/Praise Team members took their ministry seriously and prayerfully, I always fell back on my classroom days to give them an answer. I would remind them that we have different learning styles, which we carry beyond formal classroom settings into life. Some learn by listening or hearing (auditory/musical learners), some

by touching and moving (tactile/kinesthetic learners), some by seeing or sight (visual/spatial learners), and some by social interaction (direct and indirect experience learners). I have seen the least motivated, and hardly involved students in classroom or lab settings becoming animated, wide-eyed students, self-motivated, taking notes, asking questions, and actively involved in every stage during science field trips because they were in their natural elements outdoors; nature, open space, touching, smelling, feeling, and moving, were their learning styles and learning environment.

As a pastor and educator, I do sincerely believe that some will not be drawn to Christ through preaching, which is the primary way we communicate the gospel in the church, because they are not auditory learners, or by sight, no matter how rich the PowerPoint presentations are, because they are not visual learners. The Word of God is enough by itself, “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart,” (Heb. 4:12). And “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God,” (Rom. 10:17). The problem is the HEARING part. How do we hear the Word? How do we learn and interact with the Word? That’s different for different persons. How does the Word or Logos (something alive but invisible) become Flesh or Incarnated (something concrete) for an individual? (John 1:1, 14). You don’t have to be a teacher to know that the attention span of this generation is moving from short attention span to (dwindling to) near zero. Young people today are engrossed and captivated¹⁷ with constantly changing stories, events, gossips, scenes, and sceneries sent to their smart phone apps, Facebook, texting, messaging, YouTube videos, etc.

Some learn in life, and will come to faith in Christ, primarily through friendships, social interactions, by associating with the local church and church members without feeling intimidated or unwanted, through inclusion in church activities. Our modern evangelistic approach must include those who learn or belong, first by doing and participating in church cookouts and

17. Captivate: from the Latin root word, meaning “to take, capture,” “caught, taken prisoner.”

picnics, and not necessarily by age old practice of listening to a sermon and responding to invitation to come to the altar for prayers. We should make room for individuals who belong by way of imbibing and absorbing, via a kind of osmotic process of gradual or unconscious assimilation of ideas and lifestyle. Some need to be included and feel welcome into the inner circle of the church even before they acquire the traits of the circle. I might not be so open-minded if the issue had come up in a church in the community. My response would depend on the identity and philosophy of the local church. That is, is it “All Saints Church” or “All Souls Church”? [No offense to All Saints/All Souls Churches, please; just playing on words.] An all-saints church is characteristically welcoming to saints and exclusive of sinners, but an all-souls church is open to all comers—saints and sinners. In prison, however, I would be willing to err on the side of inclusion and let them belong, in the choir/praise team, without any conditions or prerequisites, because I am a chaplain of an all-souls chapel. If any leader of the team had wanted to continue the conversation for exclusivity or a “holy club” mindset for the praise team—none ever did—I would have pointed to his uniform to drive home my point that he, also, is one of the sinners¹⁸

Crime, the Watered-down Human Nomenclature for Sin, Is a Heart Problem

When an exasperated special education teacher in Brooklyn, NY, had run out of options and out of wits he would say to his belligerent, cantankerous, and pugnacious class, “Keep on being disruptive, misbehaving and uncooperative. Don't bother to listen to me. Just know you are not hurting me; you

18. “*He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.*” A statement said by Jesus, to the scribes and Pharisees when they brought to Him a woman who was caught in adultery; a scenario that was more of a trap for Jesus than their desire to obey Moses. They had asked Jesus of His opinion on Moses' stipulation, before they stoned the woman to death, according to the Law of Moses—John 8:1-12. No one in the Jewish religious echelon that had gathered around Jesus that early morning with stones in hand, waiting to carry out Moses' stipulation passed that test. No one ever did, but Jesus, who wouldn't cast the stone. A Yoruba proverb says that those who live in glass houses shouldn't engage in throwing stones. Truth be told, we all live in fragile, stone houses.

are hurting yourselves. Thanks to you, it's for kids like you that people like me will always have a job in the educational system." It's the last part that always got my attention. He was right. In some school districts in New York City, under budget cuts, a special education and/or ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher was more likely to be hired or be retained in her teaching position than a science teacher. In our context of prison ministry, this is to say that if there's greed in human hearts there will always be crimes. If there are crimes, there will be the need for prisons. If there are prisons, there will be the need for prison ministries.

The last to be mentioned, or the tenth, of the Ten Commandments is, "You shall not covet," (Exo. 20:17). It might be the cream of the "thou shalt not" compilation. It is the only sin in the commandments that's hidden and buried in the heart. Covetousness or greed manifests in the breaking of the previous nine Commandments. Nine commandments deal with external, practical, visible or action deeds, such as, "You shall not steal," "You shall not commit adultery," etc. Only one commandment deals with internal, heart-related, hidden, or thought-provoked deeds. Breaking this one commandment predisposes one to breaking the other nine. This sin of the heart is the progenitor of all sins. Though greed or covetousness is a sin of the heart, it manifests in wickedness, violence, bloodshed, robbery, rape, incest, and an untold number of crimes.

The Bible helps to connect the dots by linking the human heart to wickedness. We see wicked and sadistic deeds, which our court systems deal with and the news media often graphically report. Those are the fruits, or the results of, the condition of a sick heart. We see crimes—the end products, not the underlying and preconditioning factors. God sees the seed for the action buried deeply in the heart long before they manifest into actions. We might not be certain which comes first, the egg or the chicken. One thing is certain about criminality and which comes first—crime or greed. The resounding answer is: GREED, the unseen sin of the heart. Concerning the condition of the human heart, the Bible says,

"Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth,

and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually,” (Gen. 6:5; emphasis mine).

“The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9; emphasis mine).

Primarily, crime is not color-coded, race-specific, neighborhood-aligned, creed-oriented, poverty-affiliated or a status symbol. Its bedrock is spelled g-r-e-e-d. Greed is a leveler; it does not discriminate between the affluent and the poverty-stricken of society. It is a sin of the heart. Sadly, as mentioned earlier, as long as there are sins of the heart, there will always be crimes in every strata of society and every zip code. As long as there are crimes, there will always be the need for prisons, penitentiaries and incarcerations. As long as there are prisons, there will always be the need for prison ministries. There will always be the call for the people of God to arise, minister and work for transformation.

Criminal tendencies begin in the heart. Crime, therefore, is a heart problem. It's the product of a sick heart made defective by sin. What's the solution? Call a heart surgeon? No! Not for a sin-sick heart. The human heart needs the gospel, the gospel of a heart transplant. How do we nip the problem in the bud? I'm glad you asked. Go to its roots; go to the heart, the source. Treat the heart and the body will recover. Provide a heart transplant and the society will be healed. This is what the Lord promised in Ezekiel 36:26 when the Lord said, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh”.

Back to the question God asked Elijah, “What are you doing here?” What am I doing here in DOCCS? I'm here to re-echo the words of the prophet Ezekiel when he bellowed, “Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die?” (18:31; emphasis mine). I'm here to proclaim the possibility of a new heart, a new beginning, and a divine heart transplant to all who will listen. I'm here not only to call attention to the root problem, sin, a defective heart, but also to point to the cure, the Savior, the loving, forgiving and merciful God who has made a way for our salvation and reconciliation

through the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Mercy! Mercy, Lord!

In my first two weeks on the job as prison chaplain, during one orientation seminar, one of the presenters retold a joke, I guessed it as an inside joke. He said the difference between an inmate and the rest of us (not excluding the arresting Police Officer and Correction Officers) was that the long arm of the law had caught up with the inmate, but the long arm of the law hadn't caught up with the rest of us yet. He emphasized “yet.” Strange and scary talk! But I always keep that at the back of my mind. As I listened to the presenter tell the joke, I also recalled that during a scandalous fall from grace of a promising politician, my pastor in Brooklyn, the Reverend (Dr.) Gary V. Simpson, had made a similar statement. He said in his sermon that the difference between the disgraced politician (disgraced over inappropriate selfie, nudity and sickening porn photographs!) and the rest of us was that hitherto the two angels named Grace and Mercy had conspired to be on our side and to cover us and our mess. But for them we would be in the news as well. He drove home his point by saying that we should be thankful that “Grace and Mercy” not only concealed from others the skeletons in our cupboards but as well that the duo made those who took notice to gloss over mercifully and graciously what they had seen as if it wasn't messy enough for attention. I chalked it up as another bizarre talk. If those were not sobering enough, I remembered there and then how Jesus had challenged and humbled a crowd of religious fanatics who were bent on enforcing the Law of Moses to the letter mercilessly. Jesus said, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” (Jn. 8:7c). Nobody did, (v. 9).

The Reverend Cleveland Thornhill, a Protestant chaplain serving in one State prison facility, who was one of my mentors, had a unique, favorite interjection. As we held conversations on any topic and we got deeper and serious, he would suddenly interject, “Mercy!” or, “Mercy, Lord!” I used to ask myself

why he was crying out for mercy when neither of us was getting into trouble for what we were saying or doing. Now I know better. I need mercy both on rainy and sunny days, hopefully, to be available in my account ahead of any raining day. Jesus had trumped mercy above all OT sacrifices and burnt offerings on one occasion when He said, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance," (Matt. 9:13). James, the brother of Jesus, would later write in his epistle, "Mercy triumphs over judgment," (Jam. 2:13b). The Psalmist, conscious of his fallibility and errors, said, "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared," (Ps. 130:3, 4).

I don't like the expression, "There go I but for the grace of God," because it inadvertently suggests that the grace of God is selective and has not been extended to the other person—the unfortunate one. That notion is antithetical to my understanding of grace. Although the grace of God may appear to us as arbitrary or even random, I want to believe it is freely dispersed and dispensed. Grace is never deserved and never merited by anyone; so, technically, no one is ever left out. I doubt if we can fully understand grace. The more you probe into grace the deeper it gets and the less you comprehend it. At the end of your study, you are just thankful you've been graced by grace. It seems then the more you appreciate grace, the more grace you see in action. I might not like the saying "but for the grace of God, there go I", because it makes grace selective, but who can deny its truth, or its weight? ("For He [God] says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.' So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. ... Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills," Rom. 9:15, 16, 18a.)

Jesus did not simply take alcohol and tobacco away from me when I gave my life to Him; He changed my heart; He gave me His Holy Spirit; He endowed me with a mind renewed and empowered with the desire to be like Him. "To thine own self be true," says Polonius in Hamlet; Act 1, scene 3; (William Shakespeare). Truth be told, I might not be guilty of the big sins, but I'm scared to admit that, especially knowing the kind of person I was

before my Christian conversion in 1972, I couldn't deny the propensity for them and even the possibility for them in myself. I fear I could also have done the unthinkable, especially if I had had a chain of woes and bad days, or, like King David, if I had become desperate to cover up my tracks at any cost. It's hard to fathom how low and how far and how awfully out-of-character a desperate person (as in desperado) could go to save his skin. Ask King David.

The Psalmist of Israel, King David, never intended plotting the murder of Uriah the Hittite, one of his loyal military soldiers, who was always named among the best and bravest (2 Sam. 23:39; 1 Chron. 11:41). Yet, out of desperation to cover up a grave but (humanly speaking) lesser sin of adultery with the soldier's wife, King David, "the man after God's own heart," (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22) sank deeper into sin than he ever thought he could (2 Sam. 11). For King David, one bad choice on that fateful afternoon led to another and by the time the dust settled, David had broken the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th commandments. As they both knew, the Law prescribed the death penalty for both David and Bathsheba for their adulterous relation, (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22).

The then unknown young, brave, exuberant David did not write any psalm to celebrate his victory over Goliath. I guess out of humility and acknowledging the source of his victory he had declared, "the battle is the Lord's" (1 Sam. 17:47b) as he ran towards fully armed Goliath swinging his shepherd sling with his only weapon: a stone. But when confronted and convicted by the prophet Nathan (2 Sam.12), this broken and convicted renowned king went public. David wrote a couple of psalms, especially Psalm 51, to grieve and confess his adulterous act. David could not offer any sacrifice to atone for his sins, but he knew that "a broken and contrite heart... God [would] not despise" (vv. 16, 17). A repentant King David cried out to God,

"Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin... Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me," (Psa. 51:2, 10-12; NIV).

Needless to say, that if I had taken up the position of chaplaincy with a sense of self-righteousness or holier-than-thou attitude, it dissipated after my first two weeks on the job. I believe it was from a deep sense of awe, holy reverence, and authentic, accurate self-examination that the saints of old prayed, as in Psalm 19:12-14 and Proverbs 30:7-9:

12Who can understand his errors?

Cleanse me from secret faults.

13Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins;

Let them not have dominion over me.

Then I shall be blameless,

And I shall be innocent of great transgression.

14Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart

Be acceptable in Your sight,

O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:12-14).

7Two things I request of You

(Deprive me not before I die):

8Remove falsehood and lies far from me;

Give me neither poverty nor riches—

Feed me with the food allotted to me;

9Lest I be full and deny You,

And say, “Who is the Lord?”

Or lest I be poor and steal,

And profane the name of my God. (Proverbs 30:7-9).

Termination of Pastoral Ministry to an Inmate

When an inmate is transferred to another prison, paroled or released to society, the chaplain's ministry to that inmate has ended, and he or she has no further role in the inmate's case, except continuing to pray for the inmate, privately. Any further contact or relationship with the inmate must be pre-approved and sanctioned from Albany. This sounds harsh to some, but it is not. It is practical, and it is what happens elsewhere, in pastoral ministries,

businesses or the health sector.

For example, when a pastor retires or transfers to another local church, ideally, all pastoral relationships with the previous church and members of that church should end. Otherwise it would be meddling and messy. It would not facilitate transferring of allegiance to the new pastor and would delay bonding in the new relationship with the succeeding pastor. When an employee resigns or retires from an office or business, is it ethical for him to continue relationship with the staff and/or clients of the business as if he still has authority or influence? Of course, not! What happens when you transfer your medical history and health care from one primary physician to another? Do you continue to discuss your health issues with the former physician care provider, or do you consider that relationship closed? Of course, if you trust your new provider and desire his full commitment to your health issues, you sever prior relationship and give him or her your case. It is the same with a chaplain to a former inmate.

If anyone needs to be weaned off the penal system mentally and emotionally, it is an inmate reentering society. How do you expect the inmate who's been released from your facility and your care to form relationships and bond with society if you remain his or her spiritual care provider or counselor? We do the best we can while an inmate is in our pastoral care and when the time comes for the inmate to move on, we gladly and gracefully cut the umbilical cord, entrust him to God's care, believing God is able to arrange help for him from other sources and shepherds that are even better and more comprehensive than what we've provided.

I once had an inmate who had spent 35 years in prison, with the last several years in our facility. After his release, he kept sending me cards, writing, and calling me at work. Though I discouraged him, he seemed to have no other outlet to share and connect with. He wanted to update me on his progress, the job he'd been offered and resumption date, but much more, find out about the welfare of other inmates and the conditions of the Kairos volunteers, especially the ones with health issues that we'd been praying for. Each time I got a card, letter, or phone call from him I had to log it and report

it to my supervisors. The coordinating chaplain put it best when he said that the ex-inmate had been institutionalized and all he knew was the jail and the relationships he had formed in the jail. In a way, his friends and family were fellow inmates and volunteers who visited our prison to lead Bible study and minister to inmates. For decades, his world had been the prison. Even if the directive does not forbid continuing such relationship, common sense should. How else would he be able to put the prison in the past tense, engage and invest in new relationships outside the prison walls if the prison chaplain continues to play a vital role in his life?

Post Covid-19, the Dawn of a New Era, the Onset of a New Normal

After one year of lockdown, we received the go-ahead to resume the weekly religious services in prisons with attendees wearing facemasks, six feet social distancing, not exceeding 33% capacity of the space, opening windows to increase cross ventilation and air circulation. We observed other covid-19 prevention protocols, including no handshakes or hugs, no sharing of hymn books or bibles, and no distributing of handouts or printed materials, to forestall the possibility of spreading the virus from person to person through contact. For this reason, I stopped handing out the printed version of my sermons. Sadly, I also noticed that I had lost the discipline and skill of condensing my sermons to the two sides of an 8.5 x 11 paper. My post-covid-19 typewritten sermons began to run to 5 or even 7 pages, though I still preached my longest sermons under (or at the edge of) 30 minutes. When any inmate asked for a copy of the message after the service, I made copies and mailed them to all inmates in attendance during the service. However, I tried to do this sparingly, due to budget cuts after covid-19 pandemic.

For reasons I cannot fully understand but appreciate from hindsight, I found myself preaching from the Gospel of Matthew for about 7 years, before covid-19 pandemic lockdown. I believe it would be in the first 3 months of my chaplaincy that I decided on book studies, as a theme, so I wouldn't find myself searching everywhere in the Bible, Sunday after Sunday, for a text on

prison and prisoners, or jail and jailers, simply because I was ministering to inmates. I had assumed it would be the same as before when I was chaplain in the university. Then I would fly through a book of the Bible, lumping together portions and chapters, and spending as few Sundays as possible teaching and preaching through the entire book. I decided on Matthew, not for any particular reason but for the simple fact that it is the first book in the New Testament.

As soon as I started, the Spirit kept urging me to slow down, and not hurry through. It made sense because many sitting in the prison pews were not the typically churchy type, though from time to time we had some fat Bible thumping, strictly-KJV, and scripture-quoting religious men on the call out. Also, most in attendance did not have college-level education, so I couldn't do in prison what I had done in the university chapel. However, the slower I was, the more I kept hearing "don't rush, slow down!" Although it was not my style, I disciplined myself to really s-l-o-w down. So, from Sunday to Sunday, I brooded and meditated on a Matthean passage before me, and then prepared to go anywhere the text, the Holy Spirit, the season, and the present condition of my flock would take me for a Sunday message, praying it would be "a word in season to him who is weary," (Isa. 50:4; Prov. 15:23), and trusting God for wisdom, empathy and courage to address the elephant in the room at any particular time. However, I never intended to stay that long on a book. I was in chapter 18 of Matthew when the pandemic happened.

I know many pastors and church leaders who can plan, and do plan, their sermon outlines, and themes one year and even three years in advance. I don't have that gift, or discipline of forethought. Those who know me well know that I can hardly plan two weeks ahead. I study, pray, and, in the old school lingo, "wait on the Lord." By His grace, things usually come together wonderfully, somehow, from Sunday to Sunday. My saving grace is when I am preaching on a series, or if I am preaching through a book of the Bible, then I have something to focus my thinking on for a long period of time. Even then, I could hardly decide in advance how long or many Sunday sermons

I would spend preaching the series or exploring the particular book of the Bible. Sermon preparation and preaching for me are like an art, which—as every artist knows—soon takes a life of its own. Like a child with a mind of its own, eager to be born, takes over the processes of its development right from its embryonic stage and propels me, hopefully, by the Holy Spirit, to its birthing. It is after delivery that it becomes clear to me that I have been simply the midwife, nothing more. This phenomenon happens all the time. It is the same thing that played out in this two-volume publication. Only I can tell the chapters that were originally conceived which did not make it into the volume, and the chapters which were never in the pipeline that sneaked in and worked their way into the book, only to become the highpoints.

I still find it hard to believe that you could cover the major themes of the Bible from the Lord's Prayer and stretch it for about two years. Believe it or not, we did that, from June 2014 to July 2016. The theme was:

THE STUDY OF PRAYER – Matthew 6:9-13. Ten Studies...

1. THEOLOGY OF PRAYER – “Our Father...” Focus on “Father-God,” Abba-Father, adoption into God’s family through Christ, in addition to the generic fatherhood of God over His creation.
2. ECCLESIOLOGY OF PRAYER – “Our Father...” Focus on “Our,” God’s universal and forever family called the church, *“the household of God.”*
3. TAXONOMY OF PRAYER – “Hallowed be Thy Name.” Focus on worship (“hallowed”) and the relational and redemptive names of God.
4. ESCHATOLOGY OF PRAYER – “Thy Kingdom come.” Focus on last things, including death and dying, kingdom lifestyle, and our roles in ushering in the Kingdom.
5. BIOLOGY OF PRAYER – “Give us this day, our daily bread...” Focus on living in a physical world, God’s interest in all areas of life, including our physical wellbeing, and the true Bread of life.

6. SOTERIOLOGY OF PRAYER – “Forgive us our sins...” Focus on God’s concern for our spiritual and emotional wellbeing, and God’s plan of salvation even before time began.
7. SOCIOLOGY OF PRAYER – “As we forgive those who sin against us.” Focus on relationships from living in human society, the need to forgive and seek forgiveness.
8. PNEUMATOLOGY OF PRAYER – “Lead us...” and Lead us NOT... Focus on life in the Spirit, ministry of the Holy Spirit in knowing God’s will, guidance from God’s Word and Spirit.
9. DEMONOLOGY OF PRAYER – “Deliver us from evil...” Focus on spiritual warfare and the weapons of our warfare and the victory secured for us in Christ.
10. DOXOLOGY OF PRAYER – “For thine is the Kingdom...” Focus on God’s program, power, and glory. The earth is the Lord’s. The Sovereign God is in control and not panicky by news from around the world. God would wind up history in God’s predetermined manner. Then God would put the Amen when God’s done. Christ is the Amen to all of Scriptures.

After covid-19, I was eager to go somewhere else or have something else for a theme besides “Preaching thru Matthew,” but couldn’t decide. On our first Sunday after the yearlong lockdown, on February 28, 2021, I preached from Psalm 1. (I figured you couldn’t miss it with that because Psalm 1 is adaptable to any occasion.) After that I decided to preach on the first chapter of every book of the Bible¹⁹. The following Sunday it was Proverbs 1, then Ecclesiastes 1, Song of Solomon 1, Isaiah 1, Jeremiah 1, Lamentations 1, and

19. Although I had always wanted to do something like this, what further encouraged me to pursue the theme of, “Preaching Thru the First Chapters of the Bible,” was the donation of 100 copies of encyclopedic-like book: “The Complete Guide to the Bible,” 510 pages, from the Prison Book Project in Sharpes, FL. The soft-cover book is an illustrated, easy-to-follow reference, covering both Old and New Testaments; featuring: book-by-book background and explanations, striking artwork and photography, fascinating details on Bible times, helpful cross-references and indexes, by Stephen M. Miller, bestselling author, seminary-educated journalist. I distributed copies to inmates on Protestant call out and encouraged them to read the entries on each book as I preached on the book.

on and on till this time of publication. Sometimes, it took more than one Sunday to explore the themes, various nuances and 21st century pastoral (and jailhouse) applications of the first chapter of a book. You talk of fun; we were having fun, with so much change in mood, author, literary style, historical context or era, the conflict and its resolution that agitated the mind of the author/prophet, the political and spiritual reforms or lack thereof, the silhouette and types of the Messiah, the initial audience, setting in homeland or captivity, and focal message of the books. Somehow, I came to discover that in the first chapter of every book of the Bible is to be found the hook to the rest of the book, the key that unlocks the message, the mirror that reflects the heart and condition of the author, and the overview of the spiritual and sociopolitical conditions of the era.

Even in the darkest times, the message of hope and restoration was still the dominant overtones of the Scriptures. The God of the Exodus who had orchestrated Israel's deliverance from bondage to Pharaoh and the crossing of the Red Sea was the same God orchestrating the defeat and deportation of His chosen people. Both were redemptive acts of a Sovereign God who, in essence and nature, is love, holiness, mercy, and justice. The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians, was exiled, and deported to other lands in 722-721 B.C. (2 Kgs. 17:7-41). The Southern Kingdom, Judah, was exiled to Babylon because she disobeyed God's word regarding covenant-keeping, the Sabbath years and idolatry (Deut. 28:45-68; Lev. 25:1-7; 26:27-35; 2 Kgs. 25:1-21; 2 Chron. 36:14-21; Jer. 39:1-10); first deportation in 605 B.C., third and final invasion culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, in 586 B.C. The exile was both punitive and redemptive. It was under Yahweh's surveillance, and it had an expiration date of 70 years. Jeremiah 29:10, 11 in the Message Bible reads,

This is God's Word on the subject: "As soon as Babylon's seventy years are up and not a day before, I'll show up and take care of you as I promised and bring you back home. I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for."

Prophet Jeremiah sent a letter “from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles” (29:1) in Babylon and assured the exilic people that God had not forgotten them, that they were not invisible to God, that God had good thoughts and a future-oriented good plan. Notably, probably the most quoted portion of his letter, in Jeremiah 29:11, the prophet disclosed God’s mind to His people, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.” For emphasis, please allow me to quote that verse in yet another translation, NIV. In NIV, it reads, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” From the backdrop of my present occupation as a prison chaplain, I wonder why these exilic Judeans couldn’t be happy with that, and why they continued to listen to the false prophets. I thought it should bring smiles to their faces, even in captivity, listening to the reading of God’s message through his prophet, Jeremiah, that the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had a plan and that an end was in sight.

When an inmate has a determinate release date, time goes by so fast, especially, when they go from counting down years to counting down months, or weeks. When they hit the one-year mark to their release date, some inmates disregard the months and begin to count the number of days—and possibly hours. In the first year of my chaplaincy, I had an inmate, a young black man in his early 20s, in my office to speak with his distressed mother. He was jailed for an assault. A cousin had dissed [slang for disrespected] his mother in his presence but the mother would rather let it be than pick a fight. The boy couldn’t stand by seeing his mother being dissed that way. He got into a scuffle that escalated into a bloody brawl. It was his mother who called the cops. At this time in the boy’s incarceration, the mother was facing another trouble, and the boy, a self-appointed deliverer and defender of his mom, kept pleading with the mom on the phone. “Mom, take it easy; I will soon be home. Mom, I will soon be home to take care of that. Mom, I’m coming home soon; just be patient; stop worrying.” While he was on the phone, listening to the repeated message of going home soon, I had presumed he

would be released that week or the following. After he hanged up, I asked him when he would be going home. He still had more than six months to go. That's when I learned that, to an inmate, a fix release date—no matter how far off—was a source of hope, a sign that an end was in sight. These Judean exiles in Babylon had a promised time from God, a fixed period of 70 years for the ending of their exile, to be followed by a return to their homeland to rebuild the Temple and their cities (Jer. 29:10; 2 Chron. 36:21; Dan. 9:2), but they failed to be encouraged or see divine love and mercy in the prophet's message, due to their present painful predicament.

Unlike the false prophets (in Judah and Babylon) who were prophesying what the people wanted to hear, and promising victory over the invading Babylonian army and quick return of those exiled back to their homeland, the true prophets of God, such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who prophesied the impending doom, destruction and deportation also forcefully predicted the restoration and return to homeland to rebuild the Temple. With all these from Sunday to Sunday, it turned out to be an opportunity to preach a message of hope and teach on a variety of topics and subjects of paramount interest and importance to inmates who considered their incarceration as their exile, their own deportation, and Babylonian captivity. I'm thankful that I was called to preach the GOOD NEWS to such people at such time. While I was intensely focused on the first chapter, I always provided a cursory overview of the book and the author. In between, I used recorded DVDs of telecast sermons and sermon series of some pastors/preachers, well known and beloved to the inmates.

A Couple of Shout Outs

1) To Greene County and Coxsackie Township, 2) Church People of Coxsackie, 3) The Concord Baptist Church, My Home Church in Brooklyn, and 4) My Colleagues—the chaplains of other faiths

My life and ministry have been buoyed up, strengthened, and supported by too many to count but I would be remiss if I fail to mention some.

My First Shout Out Goes to the Greene County, and the Town of Cox-

sackie: I started working as chaplain in the facility at the end of March 2013. Barely a month after I took up the position of chaplaincy, I was still living in a one-bedroom, shared bathroom and kitchen, temporary arrangement in another Correctional Facility, courtesy of the retired Protestant prison chaplain, Jay Lewis, who facilitated it. On Wednesday, May 1, 2013, I was driving from Coxsackie to the other facility (about 16 miles) after closing, probably at a little past 7pm—I worked 11am to 7pm that day, when my car broke down at the edge of Coxsackie town. Here I was, a black man, dressed in suit and tie, with a broken-down car, in what to me was the middle of nowhere. My head was whirling with questions, none of which I could answer, which further scared me. Barely ten minutes in my ordeal, a white cop came by. The police officer offered to call help for me, using his triple-A account. I told him I had an account with triple A and brought out my membership card. He called the triple-A and gave the description of where I was. I wouldn't have known how to describe my location. He left after he was informed that a towing vehicle was on the way. I breathed a little. I called the only person I knew upstate at that time, my colleague, the Muslim chaplain, Imam Gaber, wondering if he would be able to come for me. Now it was getting dark.

As soon as the cop left, two black men, brothers, living in a neighboring town, on their way home, stopped to offer their help. They asked what the problem was. I told them a towing vehicle was on the way. They asked how I would get to where I was staying 16 miles away and to where I would tow the vehicle. I had no answer for both questions. They stayed with me till the towing vehicle arrived. They suggested towing the vehicle to a mechanic workshop in Coxsackie, apparently known to them, but which had closed by then. They drove ahead and led the towing vehicle to the garage, after which they drove me to the correctional facility where I had a temporary lodging arrangement. I saved their names and numbers in my phone as my Road Angels. On Monday, May 6, 2013, after I had returned from a visit to Brooklyn by Amtrak, Thursday, Imam picked me up from where I lodged and took me to his car dealer. By noon, I drove out of the car lot in a brand-new hybrid Toyota Prius 2013. It was the timing belt that was damaged in the old car. May God send help to

the cop, whose name I do not know, and the two brothers, Alfred Russell, and Stanley Russell in their times of need. It confirms for me, a complete stranger in a totally new environment, that Coxsackie and the towns in its vicinity are safe places to live in, with good people to have as neighbors.

My Next Shout Out Goes to The Christian People of Coxsackie: It's my nature to scout around and befriend churches, fellowship centers and pastors within a good radius of wherever I live. In addition, one of the responsibilities of a chaplain is to be in relationship with local churches and worship centers to enlist volunteers for prison ministry. In line with that tradition, I visited local churches and fellowship groups in Coxsackie, Catskill, and Ravena, not simply for my work but also because I needed to be in fellowship with other Christians. However, due to my work schedule and Protestant Sunday service, which I led in prison, I couldn't worship with the churches on Sundays, so I tried many of the weekday services. I was well embraced in all the places and they had respect for the work I was doing in prison. I spent most weekends with friends in the City (Brooklyn, NY) and drove back to Coxsackie early on Sunday mornings. Whenever I spent the weekend in Coxsackie, on alternate Sundays, I tried to participate and catch as much of the service as I could in two churches in Coxsackie—the Reformed Church and the Gospel Community Church, before heading to lead worship in the prison.

The Reverend Carolyn Lewis of Second Reformed Church in Coxsackie extended a right hand of fellowship to me, and my work. I met with the church leaders in February 2014. We were out of stock for Bibles in the prison then, and they donated some used Bibles to us. The church also donated some money towards the purchase of a musical instrument. It was also a time I was seeking healing for my soul, after the passing of my late wife in March 2014. Reverend Carolyn gave me a recorded CD of music, Scriptures, and words of encouragement for those in bereavement. Most evenings I just kept playing the CD until I fell asleep. On more than one occasion, I shared fellowship and meals during the church potluck meals.

Pastors Bart Heneghan and Stanley Slager of Gospel Community Church

of Coxsackie and their members were a real blessing in many ways. First, after a meeting with the church leaders in January 2014, the Gospel Community Church donated some used Bibles to the prison. David Locke, a member of the church, became my faithful volunteer for Bible study and Sunday services until he, and his wife, Andrea, relocated to Georgia. Dave and Andrea share the same wedding anniversary date with us—my wife, Praise, and I, which provided another bonding and talking point, especially for our wives. Praise and Andrea are divinely gifted to perform wonders in the kitchen.

Fast forward to 2017. I remarried in Nigeria in January 2016. My wife, Praise, came to join me in the States in December 2016. I had a one-bedroom apartment in Coxsackie. When I was at work, she was alone in the house. She had no family or friend to call, no car, and no job to engage her. At that time, her brother was sick and undergoing treatment in Nigeria; he later died in August. Also, Rose, her covenant friend and daughter in the Lord, was undergoing treatments in hospitals in Brooklyn, NY, for unknown or misdiagnosed illnesses. Her medical reports were inconclusive; suggesting one bizarre illness after another, only to rule them out. On her phone or laptop in the hospital, she would do a Google search on every medication and procedure, and called us to share with us how confused, scared, and helpless she was. Her husband was in Nigeria, and we were the only contacts she gave to the hospitals. We kept praying, visiting her in Brooklyn on weekends, not knowing that we would attend her funeral. Pneumonia was pronounced the culprit that did her in. Despite her brief stay in New York, much of which was in two hospitals, it was surprising seeing how many turned out for her funeral, including not a few hospital staff who had attended to her.

I took my wife to Gospel Community Church on the first Sunday in January 2017. I participated a little while after I had asked one of the leaders if a member would be kind enough to drive her back home because I would have to leave to go for my service in the prison. If I said the church embraced me, they went overboard with her. Sue O'Connor became her instant big sister-friend. The kindred spirit was heavenly. Many families in the church looked forward to seeing Praise in service. True to her name, she is a worshiper. Many were drawn

to her uninhibited spirit of worship, the genuineness of her soul, her disarming and infectious smile. She was invited and included in their women programs. On most Sundays she could be the only black person in the congregation, but she felt at home so much so that she still misses the church. We regard the Gospel Community Church as one of our home churches even though we may be absent in body.

Unfortunately, in 2017 my wife suffered three heart-rending losses. In February, her close friend, Rose, died barely three months after she had relocated from Lagos, Nigeria, to Brooklyn, NY. In the same month, February, Esther, her older sister, sibling, died in Nigeria. Later in the year, her kid brother, the Reverend James Uwaya, passed in August. Little would the people of Gospel Community church know how much their effervescent love and support helped her towards healing. In August, Praise got a job with Stewart's Shop and Sue, her big sister-friend, was always available to help her around. The store manager of the Stewart's Shop in Coxsackie, Sandy, was an authentic human being, a divine soul, a supportive and nurturing trainer. She was the right mentor a new immigrant needed on her first job in the US, not to mention that the new employee was also going through a period of mourning at that time. Praise has only fond memories of working with her "wonderful manager." With her blessing, Praise later transferred to a Stewart's Shop less than a mile to our residence in Albany.

Midyear in 2017, we had bought a home in Albany. The pastor of Gospel Community said the church members would be willing to help us move—at no cost to us. About five trucks with trailers and able-bodied men, heads of households showed up on one Saturday in August for the move; one or two trucks had to be sent back. On top of that we got a check from the church to assist us in our new place. We smiled. Jesus smiled, too. That's the kind of gesture and the kind of church that Jesus smiles at. This gives me hope that real and lasting solution to the racial problem in the US is in the church. Red, blue, black, and white, we belong together under the Blood of Jesus. If divine favor is connected to one's geographic location, as some do believe, then Coxsackie is one of such places for us.

My Third Shout Out Goes to My Home Church in Brooklyn, The Concord Baptist Church of Christ: First, on September 26, 2013, the church bought a piano and stand for our prison ministry. When I asked for Bibles, the senior pastor, the Reverend (Dr.) Gary Simpson, made it a church-wide campaign for donation of money to buy Bibles for our prison. Every donor signed a “With Many Prayers and Encouragement” sticker on each copy of the Bible. On Monday, April 28, 2014, the Reverend Samuel Philips, one of the associate pastors of Concord church, drove a carload of Bibles to the prison car park. There were 18 cartons containing 180 copies of New International Reader’s Version donated by the members of the Concord Church. Also, annually, the church publishes Lenten Meditation Devotionals for use during the year’s Lenten season. The Protestant congregation of Correctional facility was included in the circulation from 2013 till 2019, until the pandemic halted the publication and the Lenten devotional became an online offer.

Jesus promised in Matthew 10:41, 42; 25:21:

He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward.

His lord said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”

It is my prayer that the cop, Alfred and Stanley Russell, Sue O’Connor, Sandy, the members of the Second Reformed Church of Coxsackie, the Gospel Community Church of Coxsackie, and the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, New York, will receive their full rewards and multiples of blessings from the King when He returns, and hear from the Master on that day, “Well done, good and faithful servants.”

Lastly, My Final Shout Out Goes to My Colleagues—the Chaplains of Other Faiths: Your strong area is sometimes also your weak area. I am cognizant of that. I am naturally playful, lighthearted, and often push the envelope, which, especially in a multicultural, interfaith environment could be misinterpreted by those who are edgy, ungrounded, and self-conscious in their religious practice. The things we discuss and laugh off, the ways and manners we try to see the world through the other person's faith lens, and the ways we seek to gain better understanding of each other's faith can only happen with these colleagues. In any other place, with some other colleagues, it will be nothing but infightings, on the mild side, or being accused of Islamophobia or anti-Semitism on the wild side. They touch me, bless me, and nurture me in different ways.

Deacon Steve Young is the coordinating chaplain and the Catholic priest. The position is one among equals; it comes with no extra pay, only additional responsibilities. Give me that position any day, and you can be sure of getting my letter of resignation the following day. I don't know how he does it. Apart from his dedication to the job, he takes the bullet for any chaplain, no matter who drops the ball. On Friday, June 13, 2014, with a rental U-Haul moving truck from Upstate hooked to his Jeep he drove me Downtown to Brooklyn after the passing of my first wife to pack and finally transfer my belongings to Coxsackie. He did the bulk of the job, being younger in age and coming from a generation of construction workers. It just happened that the time I got an apartment to rent in Coxsackie was the same time that Louise—God's blessings on her, Deacon's wife, decided to change her bed, dresser, nightstand, and buy a new set. And it just happened that rather than sell the fairly used furniture, she decided I could have them. The Deacon and his wife, Louise, were instrumental in finding a real estate agent who helped towards purchasing our home in Albany.

Imam Ben Gaber is the Muslim chaplain. Imam specializes in making your tooth ache his problem, and he sees it as his God-given duty to help relieve your pain. He is always there for you, ready to help in any way. Coming from the

City, everything Upstate was unfamiliar to me on my arrival. Catskill, Hudson, or Albany might as well be the names of towns or beverages sold on the other hemisphere. Imam Gaber was kind enough to lead me to the facility where the temporary lodging had been arranged for me, and ensured that I had a place to rest my head. Though everything was new and different from the city life I had known in Brooklyn, Manhattan or Queens in New York every one I encountered, from the personnel office to the CO who gave me orientation to the facility, had a human face. Imam was instrumental in my car shopping. He had been following the trend, and doing his research about Toyota Hybrid Prius because he was planning on trading in a car for a new one. The following week after I purchased my Prius he also traded in an old car for Prius.

Rabbi Susan Gulack is the Jewish rabbi, and the only woman on the team. She is my go-to person. She is my mentor in many areas. She brings the woman's touch and sympathetic approach to her work. On many occasions she cries and tears up, heart-broken, after hanging up on a phone conversation, or after an inmate leaves her office. She was the first to uncover one of my survival strategies in a new environment, which was playing dumb when I wasn't. She is my Hebrew/Old Testament consultant. When I cannot understand or fathom out the extent to which both Rabbi and Imam are willing to go in putting their necks on the line for an inmate—which sometimes backfires, first, I struggle and ask myself: Am I being insensitive and unsympathetic that I wouldn't go that far? After careful introspection and self-appraisal, I give myself a passing grade on sympathy. The Catholic priest and I are usually on the same page on those issues. Then I try to justify their actions by saying to myself: they need to do plenty of good works to get to Heaven, Paradise or Abraham's bosom; I go to Jesus' Father's House, to a mansion He's prepared for me, by grace through faith alone, not as a reward for any good deeds I have done. In their traditions, Imam and Rabbi seem to operate on point system while my only hope is piggybacking on Jesus—Jesus paid it all.

One line I like to throw to the group is, "English is my second language," but it ceased to work for me long, long ago. I still throw it in, when it is convenient to do so, even if no one buys it, because it is a fact that English is my

second language. There is no harm in asking for some accommodations for it, because, if that fact exists, even with a Ph.D. or not, the playing field is not level, and I am the one at a disadvantage in the group. It is undeniable that I consult the dictionary for some words, phrases and idioms that my colleagues know inside and out. Can you hear me—Deacon, Imam, and Rabbi? (This is not playing the victim card; it's stating the obvious: English is my second language. It's about time somebody believed me—and made accommodations for it.)

One weakness of mine is what happens to me when I am in a working relationship with other persons. When a partner, spouse or colleague is good in an area, for reasons I don't understand, that part ceases to be my main responsibility and my brain seems to freeze, or goes to sleep, in that area. This affected me adversely after my late wife died. I had defaulted to her every area where she was good or better—which were plenty. Her departure left me handicapped. It was like I had lost a personal assistant who was custodian to all my files and had disappeared with all my personal data. At work, my colleagues are experienced chaplains, great and remarkable in the profession. Unfortunately, because the other chaplains are so good and competent, my brain likes to tell me to let them be the ones to worry about details. I have to constantly force my brain not to go to sleep. So, in addition to being the new kid on the block, now you know why I still ask you the same questions again and again, after all these years. It's your fault, because you are so good, competent, and detail oriented, (why do I have to bother if we are a team?) What a great team we are! Thank you for picking up the slacks.

I See Hope

Taped on the door of my office in red, bold, uppercase letters is the word, HOPE. The word is there for me as well as for those who walk into my office. I see the word, hope, before I step into my office. I preach hope. I preach hope that's rooted in God, as God is revealed in God's word, not wishful thinking or empty, secular platitudes. Unapologetically, I project hope and possibilities every time I stand to teach or preach, even when I can't figure it

out or find a reason to hope. I sincerely believe that no human is omniscient enough to be a pessimist as long as God is in the equation, because when you least expect, when it seems all doors have been slammed shut, Providence can show in unexpected ways. A true pessimist is one who has no room for God in his thinking and has no faith in any Higher Power. The apostle Paul says hope is one of the three greatest. “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

What is hope? Hope believes, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). Hope is the affirmation that “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Tim. 1:15), and furthermore that “He [Christ] is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). Hope is the confidence that “hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:5). Hope says, “I will not quit; I will not give up,” for “This I know, because God is for me” (Psa. 56:9).

Hope is the refrain of Sinachi’s song, Waymaker, “Even when I don’t see it, You’re workin’; Even when I don’t feel it, You’re workin’; You never stop, You never stop workin’.” Hope is believing that Providence is at work all the time. Ruth and Esther are the only books in the (Protestant) Bible that are named after women. Surprisingly, no other book portrays Providence—God working behind the scene—better than these books. We read that Ruth just happened to find “herself working in a field belonging to Boaz” (Ruth 2:3), which happened to be the right spot. Also, it just happened that the very night that Haman had erected a gallows on which to request the hanging of Mordecai (Est. 5:14) was the same night the king couldn’t sleep which led to a chain of events that turned the tables on Haman (Est. 6:1-14). The name of God is not even mentioned once in Esther, yet, no reader can fail to see God’s fingerprint in every page and at every turn of the story. Albert Einstein had said, “Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.”

Hope is the flicker of light in the dark alley of incarceration that sustains,

in the incarcerated and his family, the promise and possibility of a new and better tomorrow. Hope is the message of the gospel of Christ, “the Lord Jesus Christ, our hope” (1 Tim. 1:1). Hope is a meaningful four-letter word. Hope is the fuel that powers the engine of life. Hope is the reason why, on my workdays, God giving me the breath and strength, I put on a brand name shirt with a matching flashy tie and an impressive suit jacket, and report for another day of service to God and humanity. At work or in church, you will never catch me dressed shabbily, many thanks to the beautiful, gorgeous, godly, virtuous women of God in my life who “dress me up” so I may embody and project hope and possibilities. (You have to forgive me for the above personal note—I couldn’t resist it, I just had to put it there. God has graced me with the right helpmate for each season of my life, which then negates the saying, “Lightning never strikes the same place twice,” and renders it a secular thought, not a divine law. In Psalm 68:19, the Psalmist exults, “Blessed be the Lord, Who daily loads us with benefits, The God of our salvation! Selah.” Thankfully, by His grace, David’s God is my God as well.)²⁰

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS

DAY 3

1. Unpack these statements by the author and explain how they apply to your life: “I believe every aspect of my life is divinely ordered; *‘The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, And He delights in his way... O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps’* (Psa. 37:23; Jer. 10:23). As a Christian, I must strongly believe that; it is what living a faith life is

20. True confession: what I initially had planned was book 2 of ten chapters of the “Dear chaplain” series, as in “Dear Uncle Mike” series in Book 1, with a 2 to 3-page prologue on a chaplain’s ministry. What had been intended to be a prologue took a life of its own and became a long chapter, which goes to show that chaplains do a lot, and function out of personal philosophies based on their theological persuasions in a multicultural and interfaith environment. Chapters 1, 2 and 10 sneaked in on me and changed the trajectory of Book 2. The human-interest storytelling format of chapter 1 turned it into a never-ending, ever-growing chapter that was difficult to conclude. Maybe, it’s supposed to be inconclusive being an ongoing event. If chapter 10 is titled a trip down memory lane, this chapter could be subtitled, Reflections and Contemplations on Current Ministry, or simply as Memoir of a Prison Chaplain.

all about. Therefore, every detail, detour, or contour, bitter or sweet, planned, or unplanned, has meaning, relevance and interwoven.”

(1) Why is it important to strongly believe so? That is, to consider the sovereignty of God as a given, as one of the nonnegotiable parameters within which we struggle to make sense and meaning of life. (2) The alternative to that mindset is for a Christian to not believe in a loving and Sovereign God, which is a belief in a haphazard, random, out-of-control world not governed by an Intelligent Mind or Deity. What would living the Christian life be like if anything—a tragedy or an accident—could happen to the Christian for which God was unaware? For example, to experience a global pandemic that caught even the Almighty God by surprise, making the Omnipotent to say, “Ops! How did that happen? I never saw that coming!”? Would you like to live in a world of this alternative scenario? Explain why you would, or would not. (3) Does believing this suggest that God is the cause, or make God the source, of sufferings, failures, cancers, accidents, murders, homicides, rape incidents, crimes, poverty, and such tragedies in life? Yes, or no, explain.

2. A directive is defined as an official or authoritative instruction, involving the management and guidance of operations; something that serves to direct, guide, and usually impel toward an action or goal. Example: “Every employee of this company must undergo a minimum 40-hours of training each year, and must be recertified by the agency every three years.” Also, a directive can be as simple as when your boss orders you to call a client. (1) Give examples of written and unwritten directives where you work or are employed. (2) What happens when an employee flouts or goes against a directive? (3) Are there cases where a directive clashes with your particular belief system or commonly accepted general ethical principles? If there are, give examples of such incidents and how you handled them.

3. Why does this prison chaplain, the author, place more importance on local churches having reentry programs for inmates returning to society than the churches simply coming to prison to lead Bible study? Somehow, he believes that coming to the prison to do Bible study, as good and necessary as this is—without a plan to embrace and welcome the inmates when they return to society—is like loving inmates from afar, keeping them at an arm's length as opposed to hugging. Is he demanding more from the churches? How and where has he gone too far?
4. Rules are rules, we hear this often. It is never funny when the shoe is on the other foot. As an institutional chaplain, this chaplain has embraced DOCCS principle of not making exemptions because once you make one exemption you open a can of worms. (1) In your relationships, how fair is this, first to the person demanding that his case is special and deserves waiving the rules, and second, to the person who has authority to make the call, the final decision? (2) Discuss how harsh, cold, and insensitive the idea of “rules are rules” can be in certain instances, especially when the authorities concerned bluntly refuse to examine the merits of the case. (3) Discuss what happens in the organization or leadership when sentiments play a part and we bend rules in someone's favor. (4) In pastoral ministries in a local church setting, would you consider “rules are rules” as the norm or are there situations and circumstances that rules may be tempered with love, mercy and even sentiments? Discuss.
5. Under the chaplain's spiritual mandate, the author writes, “Joshua was commanded and encouraged to *arise*. In like manner, the chaplain's daily spiritual assignment is to arise, to get up, and to get going, despite whatever is going on around. The chaplain cannot take his cue from the environment, which is often negative and toxic. He must be able to rise above that into another level where he is the light that brightens the surrounding and changes the

atmosphere. The chaplain's greatest resource is the ability to tap the power that's resident within him to encourage himself to keep moving, rather than looking outside for motivation, encouragement and affirmation." Explain and discuss how a chaplain does this, how he rises above the dark cloud and becomes the source of hope and strength for others.

6. Under the subtitle of the spiritual standpoint of a chaplain's typical day, the author lists seven points for consideration based on Joshua 1:2. (1) Which of the seven points is more meaningful and relevant to your situation right now? (2) Which is a present challenge to you?
7. The chaplain categorically states, "As chaplains, we have learned to see God in every situation and in everything; therefore, we see everything as miraculous, as a God-moment ... There are no accidents in a chaplain's day, only divine synchronicities (or divine incidences). For, *"The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord"* (Psa. 37:23)." Explain why you believe or struggle with believing this. Is it necessary or dangerous to function out of such belief?
8. Joshua was to lead his people to the Promised Land. The River Jordan was a great barrier and fortification against the Israelites. They needed more than human resources; they needed divine help. (1) What constitutes, symbolically, the Promised Land to which you believe God is calling on you to lead your people to claim? (2) Symbolically, what is the flooded River Jordan, the mighty barrier, between you and your goals? (3) How are you and your people aligning yourself for a spiritual breakthrough knowing that God is *"Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us,"* (Eph. 3:20)?
9. Right from Nigeria, before he relocated to the US, the author found Dele Ijagbulu's slogan, "The Individual is Important" helpful and relevant in his ministry. (1) How can you apply it to your ministry as well? (2) Should you do that, presently, who are the "little

people”, the easily discounted (or disposable!) persons in your establishment that might suddenly become visible and gain your respect and some human dignity?

10. Consider this long quote: “Another teacher sees past the dirty veneer into the untainted spirit of the same boy. Moreover, he could see in the same scrawny, dirty boy untapped possibilities and hidden potential, as well as the intangible presence of the little boy’s village: family, extended family, dads, moms, siblings, aunts, and uncles all rooting for the six-year old boy as the one who’s likely to fulfill their collective dreams and aspirations for a deliverer. While he’s teaching the boy, he treats and responds to him differently because he’s aware he’s also nurturing the hopes and dreams of “the village” whose ghost is present in the class with the boy. If the boy sinks, the village sinks with him; if the boy rises, the village is lifted... In prison, we deal with broken dreams and shattered lives. In the story of each inmate is the story of a village that’s dysfunctional, embarrassed, disappointed, deprived, deflated, defeated, and desperately in need of hope, salvation, redemption, a deliverer, and empowerment.” (1) How do we see the “village” rooting for, counting on, and depending on, the individual with whom we come in contact daily? (2) What might change in our response and treatment of each other if the teacher, nurse, chaplain, store cashier, police officer, correctional officer, taxi driver, etc. becomes aware that his action nourishes or diminishes not just the individual but a whole village, a clan, a community, or even, a race?
11. (1) Explain and discuss what the author meant by this: “We cannot get farther in prison ministry until we move from explanation to admission, from passive voice to active voice, from saying, ‘Mom, it got broken’ to saying, ‘Mom, I broke it.’” (2) Is there any area of your life or ministry where you are comfortable speaking in general terms, giving explanations and self-justifications, using the passive voice (I regret it happened), than taking ownership and admitting

- responsibility (I'm sorry I did it)?
12. The author justifies the once monthly *koinonia* service with Revelation 3:20. He writes, "I sincerely believe that sharing meals is an integral part of our Christian hospitality, fellowship and witness. If you don't believe that, please read Revelation 3:20, and tell me why Jesus added the last phrase, '*eat with him, and he with Me.*'" How theologically accurate or defensible is this position? Read also Acts 2:42-47, and see chapter 9b for his explication on the verse.
 13. "I don't sweat to make changes happen in another person's life, the counselee does. I make commitment and follow-up, but I am not the one who needs to change, or has to work towards the change, you are. A counselor is like a coach with a roadmap to success, a likely game-winning plan; the serious minded counselee, like the athlete, follows the coach's instructions, works out the plan, sweats it out in the field of life for his own victory." (1) Isn't that cold-hearted, callous, and unsympathetic? Explain why you believe it is, or not. (2) Shouldn't we expect more than a coach from a Biblical or Christian counselor? Explain why this position is appropriate or disappointing.
 14. The chaplain claims he has some unvoiced statements in his head in every situation and relationship he's in. Do you have something similar in your dealing with people in your world? If you do, explain.
 15. If you could get into his head, or be gifted to be a mind reader, how do you suppose he is processing the information in his head, when (1) in church and ministry the unvoiced is, "He is God's image bearer, whatever you do to him, you are doing to God as well;" (2) in the office when the chat turns negative about a coworker who isn't in the room, the unvoiced is, "Who is the advocate for this person who is not here to speak for himself?" (3) when he makes rounds in the hospital ward, "Every patient (or the patient's family member) is angry at someone or something;" (4) when he listens

to an inmate's story (or a teenager's account), "He's not telling the whole truth; he's still hiding something; beware of going out on a limb"? (5) Are these defensive or self-protective statements appropriate, now that you've got into his mind? (6) Where, or at what point, has he carried this too far? (7) Do you find it weird or helpful? Explain.

16. "A subject teacher in the school setting in prison would and should endeavor to raise the bar and set high expectations for the inmates in her classroom, but a prison chaplain cannot afford to set high expectations because the chaplain is dealing with something deeper, greater and more fundamental than academic performance. The chaplain is dealing with a frail human spirit, carnal thoughts, 'the flesh', or the Adamic nature, nothing cerebral." Explain how critical this is, the difference in judgment or measuring parameters, and why a prison chaplain cannot raise the bar, or set high expectations, as a classroom teacher would and should.
17. The author states, "In my opinion, the number one hot button issue in the church today is sex." (1) Explain why you agree or disagree with him. (2) Confused or baffled, he asks for your help: Why are there so many inmates, white and black, Jewish and Protestant, young and old, religious, or not, who are incarcerated for sexual offenses today? (3) How can the church help to curb the trend of church members exchanging choir robes for prison gown on sexual crimes? (Few crimes are as limiting as sexual offenses when an inmate completes his sentence and returns to society.)
18. The author has this in a footnote: "The balancing act of 'Speaking the truth in love,' (Eph. 4:15) is what builds up the church. 'Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it' (Timothy Keller). 'Truth without love is brutality and love without truth is hypocrisy'" (Warren W. Wiersbe). (1) How can we obtain

- and maintain the balancing act of speaking the truth in love? (2) If you could step back and observe like an objective outsider, in your unbiased opinion, how is your local church performing in this regard of love and truth? (3) Comment on the statements of Timothy Keller and Warren Wiersbe; how are they appropriate and on point, or not?
19. During my chat with the pastor of Concord Baptist church in his office, before I worshiped with the congregation for the first time, and later joined the church, one of the statements made by the Reverend (Dr.) Gary V. Simpson which impressed me and bolstered my decision was, **“the church is a place for whosoever but not for whatsoever.”** (1) Explain that in the light of the climate, the ambience, the unvoiced, unspoken but well-known rules, and the invisible atmosphere of your church regarding racial inclusivity. (2) Consider the position, tone and rhetoric’s of your church regarding gay, lesbian, LGBTQ, and transgender, explain/justify your church’s stance in the light of that statement by G. V. Simpson and the author’s rhetorical questions: “If Jesus visited our jail today, what would Jesus do with these men [the gay and trans]? Would Jesus snub them or welcome them? Would Jesus defend, shield, and protect them, or would Jesus expose, neglect, and abandon them?” (3) Is your local church holier and more righteous than, and does it have higher standards than Jesus regarding who is welcome with open hands and those relegated to the back seats in the church? (4) Rules or love—which is the bedrock of your position, and would you rather err on the side of rules and regulations or love and inclusion?
20. Is heaven (or the kingdom of God) homogeneous or heterogeneous? From the scenes in heaven whenever the curtains are removed as in the book of Revelation, most would say heaven is heterogeneous, consisting of all tribes, nations, cultures, tongues, and races. (1) If that’s the case, and if your church is in a multi-cultural, multi-eth-

nic city, (i) how much does the demography of your local church represent or is a reflection of the city in which it is planted and to which you have been called—Acts 1:8?; (ii) how much is your local church a reflection of heaven which embraces all tribes, tongues and races under one umbrella? (2) If your church is homogeneous, (i) how comfortable are you with that, (ii) how much are you committed to keep the status quo, (iii) how intentional are you in your quest and programming to open the doors of your church to other nationalities, ethnicities, and people subgroups in your neighborhood?

21. “Primarily, crime is not color-coded, race-specific, neighborhood-aligned, creed-oriented, poverty-affiliated or a status symbol. Its bedrock is spelled g-r-e-e-d. Greed is a leveler; it does not discriminate between the affluent and the poverty-stricken of society. It is a sin of the heart.” Explain how and why greed is the bedrock of crimes and all sins.
22. The author shares his struggles with understanding grace. He writes, “I don’t like the expression, ‘There go I but for the grace of God,’ because it inadvertently suggests that the grace of God is selective and has not been extended to the other person—the unfortunate one. That notion is antithetical to my understanding of grace... I might not like the saying ‘but for the grace of God, there go I’, because it makes grace selective, but who can deny its truth, or its weight?” Can you help him out with a clearer understanding of grace? What can you offer him to find a balance?
23. Endings, transitions, saying goodbyes, aren’t always easy in human relationships; yet, they are necessary for new beginnings that always beckon to us. (1) Explain how you have coped with transitions, endings, and saying goodbyes, in the last five years. (2) Most parts of the world just experienced global lockdown and cessation of life and society, as we were accustomed to knowing, living, and experiencing life. What part of your life and routine did the Covid-19

restrictions bring to a halt, temporary cessation, or permanent and unrecoverable ending?

24. The year 2020 was an unprecedented year that brought universal darkness, grief, death, and untold destruction on the whole world. (1) What did Covid-19 pandemic take away from you? (2) What did it take away from how you used to view life, church, relationship, and society? (3) What did it help you re-define, re-evaluate, re-appraise, or re-visit? (4) In what ways has the pandemic been a blessing in disguise, an opportunity to reboot, re-invent, or find a reset button in life and ministry? (5) What has the experience of a yearlong lockdown revealed or brought to light in your relationships, understanding of your job or daily assignments, the power of technology, the human primal cry and need for community and socializing, your perception about a global village and how interconnected the world is across the hemispheres and continents, daily life and routines, that you had not paid attention to before the pandemic? (6) The author believes there are no accidents in a world governed by an Intelligent, Supreme, Sovereign Being; that a true accident is a tragedy that has no redemptive line, one that even the Almighty God cannot redeem or bring any good out of. In his book, there's no such tragedy. He believes that the devil has not fashioned, and cannot fashion, a tragedy that God cannot skillfully weave and work into His eternal tapestry and use to bring out beauty and color. [This is not suggesting that God sent the Corona virus to punish the world, or that God caused any other tragedy, mishap, and accidents in the world.] In that light, how are you a better person, wiser in ministry after the pandemic? If, after the pandemic, you aren't better but bitter, not wiser but sillier, then you have experienced a true accident, a colossal tragedy. You have my sympathy. [You cannot be unchanged by a tragedy or accident because no one is ever the same after experiencing a misfortune or disaster. For certain, the world has changed since the pandemic.

The question is: how and in which direction?]

25. What is hope for you? What gives you hope? What steals your hope? How is your hope restored and nourished?

EXTRA CREDIT (For Those Who Can Handle This)

Maxwell, the deacon's son, and the pastor's help claimed he was gay after one term of college. Everyone in the church was asking: where did we miss it? As an educator, my job description is to strive to ask the right questions, to provoke constant questioning, not necessarily to proffer answers, or take a position. I hope I can provide some questions to chew on with this true account. (Please don't shoot the messenger. I'm just doing my job.)

Maxwell, not his name, was the son of a deacon in a Fundamentalist Baptist church, in Brooklyn, New York. He was like the pastor's son; he had the key to the pastor's office. From his high school days, he had been responsible for putting the pastor's sermons on PowerPoint, compiling and printing the church's Sunday bulletin, that was, before he went off to college. This conservative, fundamentalist Baptist pastor had 3 staples in his sermons every Sunday, to the delight of his congregation. Sunday after Sunday, he always preached against (1) Obama, who was the US president at the time. There was nothing President Obama did or could do that was right, (2) abortion—this, to him, was one of the sins of the city, one for which God's judgment had started falling (as in the 911 terrorist attack on the twin towers leading to the demise of many New Yorkers) or would fall on the city, and (3) the city's endorsement and accommodations for gay, lesbian, and homosexuality—this was the reason God was going to destroy the city. In his theology, if God did not judge the city for this, God would owe an apology to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah for destroying their cities, because their level of sodomy and lewdness paled in comparison to the city's case.

After one term in college, Maxwell returned to the church in Brooklyn and declared that he was gay. His parents and pastor were devastated. The church members, especially all his former Sunday school teachers, from the children to middle school and high school Sunday school classes, who had known him

closely were confused. The church's youth group, of which he had once been the leader, did not know how to interpret or respond to him. They were torn between keeping a distance from Max, which would warm their parent's hearts, and remaining friends of Max, because to them, gays and lesbians were human beings too. Max's peers and other college students on vacation were openly nonjudgmental and receptive to Max—as if nothing had gone wrong, which further bothered the older church members. Some parents and adults in the church were freaking out. They began to look with suspicion on every move of the teenagers, scrutinize friendships and relationship that they had previously approved and taken for granted. Members were on edge and no one could help Maxwell or talk him out of "it." The father, a NYC cop, wanted to leave the church and resign from the board of deacons but the pastor and other deacons discouraged that. The parents said, "That's our child; we can't disown him because he says he's gay, though we don't approve of the lifestyle." The pastor and the fundamentalist church couldn't disown him either because they knew him from childhood, he had attended Sunday school at every age, and each Sunday school teacher and youth leader had claimed him, treated him, and related to him as if he were his/her own child.

Following this incident, the pastor continued to criticize Obama, unabated, and was unrelenting in his condemnation of the city for abortions, but no longer preached openly against gays and lesbians. He couldn't do that with Max's parents and his young sympathizers in the pews. In small groups within the church, if the topic came up, they continued to speak against gay, lesbian and homosexual practices in fear that the church's silence might normalize it for other young persons heading to college to follow in Maxwell's footsteps. At the same time the rhetoric and condemnation was toned down. They did not want to alienate the teenagers, young adults and friends of Max, or push them to interpret their actions as bringing curses down on one of their own. If this had been Satan's device to strike at the core identity of this church, then Satan couldn't have picked a better target with greater consequential outcomes. Maxwell graduated from a 4-year college still being gay and living with a partner. The family finally moved out of New York. The pastor also

had since retired on account of age, and relocated out of New York.

Unexpectedly, for this super conservative fundamental church, gays and lesbians suddenly had a face they could not ignore in their midst. It was the face of a baptized church member; a protégé of the pastor whom the pastor had thought was heading for the ministry, brother in Christ (or, is it former brother in Christ?), a close family and dear friend. For the time being, the fire and brimstone doomsday preaching cooled off towards gay people. It was a good day for the city as gay bashing took the back seat. However, it would not be the first conservative church, and the parents and pastor would not be the first leaders with fundamental conservative values, to have their sons and daughters declaring they were coming out of the closet and celebrating being gay or lesbian. The result was always the same, even with well-known conservative politicians. First, they changed course and the rhetoric cooled down, and then a bit of humanity returned, because fatherhood and motherhood trumped long held conservative doctrines. Lastly, they took a public stand with their kids and the pronouncement usually was “that’s our son/daughter. Though we do not always see eye to eye on every point, we will always stand by and support him/her.” That’s why I ask: Were these other gays and lesbians in the city not someone else’s children when the church people spewed hateful words, played the judge, jury, and executioner that had condemned them from the pulpit? Why does the story have to change and passions wane when the shoe is in the other foot? This inconsistency can only suggest that doctrinal postulates are shifting sands and subjective to one’s convenience, which is a negation of conservatism and all it espouses, politically and culturally.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 1) What really happened to a child that was raised in the church Sunday school of a super-conservative, fundamentalist Baptist church and had become like the pastor’s unpaid assistant for him to go against everything he had been brought up to believe, just after one term in college? Discuss. Relate any similar story that you are aware of.

- 2) (i) How do we understand sexual orientation and (ii) how do we respond to such issues when it comes close to home—as in, it’s your child or a child from your Sunday school class, or your child’s favorite and beloved teacher? (iii) The usual response has been a change in course and rhetoric; is this trend right, appropriate, hypocritical or two-faced? Discuss.
- 3) Should such instances move the needle one way or another in our understanding of sexual orientation? What should the church or individuals in the church do when there’s a gap between the reality they believe and the reality that’s playing out in real time? Comment.
- 4) (i) Is the answer sending our children to Christian colleges? If yes, why; if no, why not? (ii) Can all Christian families afford the tuition in Christian colleges? If not, is financial status then, a predictor of whose child becomes gay and whose child remains straight after graduating from a city (or secular) college? (iii) Is the purpose of Christian college education a way to shield our children from the real world, only to suddenly expose them, unprepared, to the workforce where they encounter the issues with no skills or tools to handle them? (iv) What are the genuine purposes of Christian schools and Christian education?
- 5) Could the pastor’s stance—hammering and bashing gay and lesbian Sunday after Sunday, in any way be a precipitating or contributing factor to the boy’s quest, inclination, or self-discovery for such a lifestyle? (In politics, there’s no negative publicity; any publicity means more visibility, and visibility generates and increases awareness for whatever the issue or person that’s desirable or not.)

Biblical Foundations for Prison Ministries: Why Do We Do Prison Ministry?²¹

Not to Do (or Support) Prison Ministry Qualifies as a Sin of Omission

There are two kinds of sins: sins of commission and sins of omission. In essence, they are one and the same, like the two sides of a coin. It always turns out that the sins of omission which are rarely talked about, are, in the end, the more damning and dangerous in their effects.

I have counseled many couples seeking divorce. When I asked the wives for the reasons, not infrequently, they said something like this: “It is not for what he did. He never raised his voice at me, never laid his hands on me. He never failed to buy clothes and school supplies for the kids. It is what he didn’t do that hurt badly and broke my heart. We have grown separately apart over the years. We absolutely have nothing in common any more than the children—who are now grownups. His disregard left me with no other option.” When I asked for specifics, they gave me a list of specific instances of neglect and the emotional pains the husband had brought on them for “doing nothing.” I will never forget the painful statement, “It’s not what he did but what he didn’t do.” It’s for the sin of omission that many seek divorce!

Sins of commission can be described as blatantly aggressive, openly hostile, overtly belligerent, and straight up confrontational. The sins of omission can be described as passive aggressive. Passive-aggressive behavior is a pattern

21. I’m thankful to my colleagues, Rabbi (Dr.) Susan Gulack and Imam E. Gaber, MD, who were my consultants and sounding boards in many areas, especially in this chapter, as well as chapter 1. They also read chapter 8, the monthly bulletins I mailed to inmates during the pandemic lockdown, and willingly afforded me the benefit of their insights.

of indirectly expressing negative feelings instead of openly addressing them. There's a disconnection between what a passive-aggressive person says and what he or she does. In Jesus' parable of the Two Sons in Matthew 21:28-32, the passive aggressive son promised his father, at the father's request, that he would go to the farm but did not. Whereas the openly and blatantly defiant son who had disobeyed his father to his face, repented and did the father's bidding.

We hear more of the sins of commission, such as:

1. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit
2. Cain murdered his brother, Abel
3. The nation of Israel repeatedly bowed down to idols, disregarding the first and second commandments
4. Achan the son of Carmi coveted and stole the forbidden booties of war that had been totally dedicated to God
5. King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and, to cover it up, plotted the murder of her husband
6. Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver
7. Ananias and Sapphira, his wife, lied to God

These are sins of commission, of open defiance. God held the transgressors responsible and punished them for their sins. We also read of sins of omission, such as:

1. The high priest Eli was held responsible *"because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them,"* (1 Sam. 3:13).
2. King Saul was rejected of God, because he failed to follow divine instructions
3. King David was a great warrior but a poor father who failed to train, or discipline his errant children, or be a good role model to them (2 Sam. 13:21; 15:1-6; 1 Kgs. 1:6)
4. In Deuteronomy 15:7-11, the law of Moses commanded generosity

to one's fellowman, saying, *"You shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs"* (vv. 7, 8). Also, Lev. 25:35-37. *"If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him"* (v. 35). In the New Testament, 1 John 3:17, corroborated the imperative to be generous this way, *"But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?"* This is not necessarily to say that anyone who fails to be generous is guilty of the sin of omission but it does make the point that *the love of God [does not] abide in him*—1 Jn. 3:17.

5. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite showed no compassion as they *"passed by on the other side"* of the wounded victim.
6. In Paul's letter to his protégé, Timothy, the apostle instructed him concerning the church members who neglected their duty to family, noting, *"But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever"* (1 Tim. 5:8).
7. In Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31, the rich man did not end up in hell because he was rich. He ended up in hell, because he abused the stewardship of his wealth. He did not extend hospitality, kindness, generosity, and care to the less fortunate people like the beggar, Lazarus.
8. In Jesus' parable of the talents in Matthew 25, the servant who had received one talent and buried it. I guess he didn't want to take the risk of losing it, or it being stolen. He did nothing with the money, was careful to return the same currency intact back to the master. He was, however, condemned for his willful, calculated neglect and failure to put the money to work for his master. He was punished for doing nothing profitable with what he had been given.
9. In the same chapter, Matthew 25, we read Jesus' parable of sheep and

goats. The class of goats, those on the left, was condemned for what was in their power to do, but they failed. *“Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me’”* (vv. 41-43). They were condemned for being inhumane to their fellow human beings, for withholding hospitality, for turning away the hungry and thirsty when they had the means to help and for their failure to visit the sick and those incarcerated.

10. James 4:17 categorically calls the sin of omission, sin, *“Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.”* In Romans 14:23, Paul writes, *“But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; **for whatever is not from faith is sin.**”* This implies that worrying—which is not from faith—is sin.

Presumptuous and Unintentional Sins in Old Testament Scriptures

Leviticus chapters 4 and 5 detail unintentional sins for which the people—whosoever, the priest, the leaders, the common people or the whole assembly—were nonetheless guilty and responsible for seeking cleansing and forgiveness through the prescribed levitical sacrifices. Unintentional sins were sins of omission that were committed not out of defiance and rebellion against God and society but being unaware, out of ignorance and innocence of heart. An ancient maxim of the law is “ignorance of the law does not excuse.” Thomas Jefferson said, “Ignorance of the law is no excuse in any country. If it were, the laws would lose their effect, because it can always be pretended.” Apparently, “Ignorance of the law” is not tenable or excusable in divine court as well.

We read the following from Leviticus chapter 4:

“Now the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel,

saying: “If a person sins unintentionally against any of the commandments of the Lord in anything which ought not to be done, and does any of them, (4:1, 2; emphasis mine).

“Now if the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally, and the thing is hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they have done something against any of the commandments of the Lord in anything which should not be done, and are guilty; when the sin which they have committed becomes known, then the assembly shall offer a young bull for the sin, and bring it before the tabernacle of meeting (4:13, 14; emphasis mine).

“When a ruler has sinned, and done something unintentionally against any of the commandments of the Lord his God in anything which should not be done, and is guilty, or if his sin which he has committed comes to his knowledge, he shall bring as his offering a kid of the goats, a male without blemish (4:22, 23; emphasis mine).

How can anyone read such Old Testament scriptures and not be thankful that “the blood of Jesus Christ His [God’s] Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7)—ALL sins, inclusive of all sins of commission, omission, intentional, unintentional, and presumptuous. “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

The Psalmist prayed against “secret faults” and “presumptuous sins,” which he regarded as “great transgression.” David cried out,

Who can understand his errors?

Cleanse me from secret faults.

Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins;

Let them not have dominion over me.

Then I shall be blameless,

And I shall be innocent of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart

Be acceptable in Your sight,

O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer (Psa. 19:12-14; emphasis mine).

God's Specific Call and Mandate to His People to Consider Ministry to Prisoners

The following scriptures show God's call to His people to help and minister to those in prison. God Himself, kept company with some prisoners, as we read in the story of Joseph and Jeremiah in the Old Testament and of the apostles in the New Testament. A recurring refrain in Joseph's story was that the Lord was with Joseph in prison and gave him favor. Symbolically, the call goes beyond incarceration behind barbed wires and tall walls. There are many prisons that are not physical, such as imprisonment to lusts, addiction to drugs, and bondage to dangerous habits that are self-destructive and yet difficult to break, and continually hold the individuals—their captives—in bondage.

For reasons of age, proximity, infrastructure and finance, every Christian may not be involved in physically visiting or ministering to prisoners in their cells. However, we should all be involved in one way or the other helping to set the captives free and bringing deliverance to prisoners in their various bondages and confinements: namely, mental, emotional, spiritual, financial, and physical bondages. You may live far from a prison facility with tall walls, barbed wire fences and patrol guards, but if you look around you will discover that different types of prisoners surround you. These are prisoners who are not incarcerated behind bars and are freely roaming the streets under the stranglehold chains of addiction, abusive relationships, self-imposed crippling virtual structures of religion or culture. They include children, men and women in bondage and groaning, because they are held in chains that are not physical but are limiting, restraining, and choking life out of them. If that's not inclusive of the call to prison ministry, then I don't know what it is.

This broad consideration of imprisonment—to which all the scriptural passages below testify—is the reason and justification that the King in Matthew 25 could look into anyone's face and be morally permissible for Him to say to that individual, "I was in prison and you visited Me," or "I was in prison and you did not visit Me." The King could explain, "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me," or, "Inas-

much as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” The question is: Do we see Jesus in the faces of those in bondage? Do we see the face of Jesus in those incarcerated in either virtual or physical prisons? There have been times that I had reversed course and helped in some situations when I could offer some help but had been tempted to walk past. I had reconsidered, because the thought had come to me: What if that was Jesus in disguise? Who can tell how many Jesuses I inadvertently walk past each day, because the Jesus was in a filthy condition? Mercy, Lord.

We are all prisoners in bondage to sin. The thrust of the gospel message is deliverance from sin, Satan and consequences of associating with sin and Satan. The New Testament message of salvation is about setting the captives free from bondage and imprisonment to sin, sinful habits, Satan’s grip and deception. Let’s read Galatians 3:22, 23 in two translations:

But the Scriptures declare that WE ARE ALL PRISONERS OF SIN, so we receive God’s promise of freedom only by believing in Jesus Christ. Before the way of faith in Christ was available to us, we were placed under guard by the law. We were kept in protective custody, so to speak, until the way of faith was revealed (Gal. 3:22, 23; NLT; uppercase mine).

But THE SCRIPTURE HAS IMPRISONED EVERYONE [EVERYTHING—THE ENTIRE WORLD] UNDER SIN, so that [the inheritance, the blessing of salvation] which was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe [in Him and acknowledge Him as God’s precious Son]. Now before faith came, we were kept in custody under the Law, [perpetually] imprisoned [in preparation] for the faith that was destined to be revealed, (Gal. 3:22, 23; AMP; uppercase mine).

Jesus’ Messianic manifesto in Luke 4:18, 19, was quoted from Isaiah 61:1-3. Jesus’ declaration should enjoin us, His followers, to do the same.

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me,
Because the Lord has anointed Me
To preach good tidings to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,

Teach Them

To proclaim liberty to the captives,

And the opening of the prison to those who are bound (Isa. 61:1; emphasis added.)

“I, the Lord, have called You in righteousness,
And will hold Your hand;
I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people,
As a light to the Gentiles,
To open blind eyes,
To bring out prisoners from the prison,
Those who sit in darkness from the prison house.
I am the Lord, that is My name;
And My glory I will not give to another,
Nor My praise to carved images (Isa. 42:6-8; emphasis added.)

Thus says the Lord:

“In an acceptable time I have heard You,
And in the day of salvation I have helped You;
I will preserve You and give You
As a covenant to the people,
To restore the earth,
To cause them to inherit the desolate heritages;
That You may say to the prisoners, ‘Go forth,’
To those who are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves.’
“They shall feed along the roads,
And their pastures shall be on all desolate heights.
They shall neither hunger nor thirst,
Neither heat nor sun shall strike them;
For He who has mercy on them will lead them,
Even by the springs of water He will guide them (Isa. 49:8-10; emphasis added.)

Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also (Heb. 13:2, 3; emphasis added.)

Then Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were confined. And he was there in the prison. But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper (Gen. 39:20-23).

Moreover the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah a second time, while he was still shut up in the court of the prison, saying, "Thus says the Lord who made it, the Lord who formed it to establish it (the Lord is His name): 'Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know' (Jer. 33:1-3; emphasis mine).

"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 'For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'

"For I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' "Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a

stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’” (Matt. 25:34-40, 42-45).

The Spin Jesus Put on Old Religious Ideas

Jesus was a Master Storyteller as we read His parables in the Gospels. He was also the authentic Editor and Interpreter of the Old Testament because He knew the true intents of the Law. Jesus told the legalists, “Man was not made for the Sabbath [to be restricted and enslaved] but the Sabbath was made for Man [as a gift from God, for Man to rest, worship and reflect]—Mark 2:27, 28.

The *Shema*, (Heb: “Hear”), the Jewish confession of faith (Deut. 6:4–9): To Love God with all your heart, soul and strength/might (your *Veryness*²²—*closest rendering from the original language, your very being, all you are*). Jesus and the New Testament writers added “with all your mind” (Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27; Matt. 22:37). That’s why we can have Christian scientists because God gave us a mind to reason and to love Him as our “reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1). Loving with the mind means shifting your awareness so that you can shift your emotional experience, there’s no disconnect between head and heart.

Jesus added some spins to old concepts, elevating the Law to the intentions and motives, even with no outward action of breaking the law, such as, adultery and murder. On adultery Jesus put a spin in Matthew 5:27, 28. “*You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” Thus, Jesus equated lustful look to actual adultery. If you undress a woman/man with your eyes, if you can imagine yourself in bed with him/her—just in your mind, you’ve already committed adultery with that individual. Jesus also equated bitter anger or rage to actual murder—Matt. 5:21, 22.

22. Courtesy of my colleague, Chaplain Rabbi (Dr.) Susan Gulack.

I will highlight the two stories: 1) The story of the Good Samaritan—Luke 10:30-37, and 2) the judgment of the nations/sheep and goat—Matt. 25:31-46. I think these two passages provide a springboard for prison chaplaincy.

The Spin Jesus Put on Old Religious Ideas: “I Was in Prison, And You Visited Me”

“Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and IN PRISON AND YOU DID NOT VISIT ME.’ Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or IN PRISON, AND DID NOT MINISTER TO YOU?’

Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, INASMUCH AS YOU DID NOT DO IT TO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE, YOU DID NOT DO IT TO ME.’ And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life,” (Matt. 25:41-46; emphasis mine).

This parable of the judgment of the nations, which we read in Matthew 25:34-40, has a parallel in Jewish Talmud and other religious writings of the world except one phrase: “I was in prison and you visited me...” Most religions of the world teach us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and care for widows and orphans. These are vicissitudes of life: people have come on hard times and they deserve pity, sympathy, and help. The Talmud and other religious writings do not have the provision for prisoners; they do not extend grace and mercy to prisoners or the miscreants of the society. Unless a person is imprisoned for preaching the gospel or maintaining a different political view under a despotic government, most prisoners have done something wrong to neighbor or society, and many feel they deserve the punishment. This is where Jesus and the New Testament gospel differ and part ways from other religions of the world. Jesus says that visiting the prisoner is important, because they are also children of God, they might have run away from the Father’s house, but they are still redeemable. The Father is anxiously looking out the window for their return.

Rabbi Susan Gulack was kind enough to mention that there was a commandment for Jews to redeem the captives. She also explained that by the time of the Talmud, the Jews were not self-ruling and did not have prisons. Indeed, prison was not a punishment in Jewish Law; lashes and monetary compensations and in very rare cases death, but not prison. The cities of refuge were places people went voluntarily. The individuals responsible for manslaughter sought shelter in the cities of refuge to escape unwarranted vengeance and bloodshed from “the avenger of blood.” In Jewish customs, the punishment for crimes was to provide compensation and a measure of justice for the victims who had suffered losses—economic, emotional, physical injury, or loss of a body part. The community leaders decided what was fair punishment for the offender and equitable compensation for the offended. The offender was required to make restitution beyond the value of the crime, to serve as deterrent. If he had no saleable substance for restitution and his family could not pool their resources to help him, he was to be in servitude to the victim until his services could pay for not only the monetary value of his crime but additional restitution as well. Crimes were treated as offenses against individuals rather than the Jewish community.

As we read in the Gospel, Jesus went as far as to say in that Matthew’s passage that some would be allowed or denied entry into the kingdom of God based on this integral part of godliness—“visiting those in prison.”

True religion, according to James 1:27 summarizes the old beliefs: visit and help widows, orphans, fatherless, etc. rather than take advantage of their defenselessness. That’s Religion 101—to help the vulnerable. The Scouts and citizenship seminars teach that, too. The Talmud and other religious writings prior to Christ encouraged visiting and caring for the sick, helping and feeding the homeless, orphans, redeeming the captives, etc. In other words, those who are vulnerable or victims or have fallen on hard times deserve our help and sympathy, but prisoners? They are the victimizers, the bullies, the threat to society, and the cancer in our midst. Here, a villain is a focus of Jesus’ ministry.

Jesus put a spin on our social considerations and theological positions on the victims and their victimizers, in Matthew 25:34-40 when He added vis-

iting those in prison. When Jesus commanded in the Sermon on the Mount to “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44) was He saying I should love my victimizers, persecutors, and abusers? As mentioned earlier, unless a person is incarcerated for political or missionary activities under a repressive government, most prisoners have committed a crime that society deemed them unfit to live in community, or at least to be put away for penitence and reformation. We therefore demand justice for the victim and safety for society. So, naturally, we want to lock them up and throw the key into the bottomless pit.

Jesus added the prisoners to the list to be visited, encouraged, and ministered to, because they are redeemable; they are God’s “other children”. Today’s persecutor of Christians like Saul of Tarsus under grace could be tomorrow’s fervent apostle of Christ referred to as Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ, the author of a third of the New Testament. This is one point where Christianity parts ways with other faiths. Where do you find the society’s passion and pity? They are with the victims, of course. Where do you find God? We find God with the victims, comforting and nursing their wounds. Additionally, we find God with the victimizers, assuring them they could be forgiven, cleansed and offered a new heart and a new start. Where do you find the chaplains? They are found with the victim and victimizers. That is, they are with the man robbed and wounded in the story of the Samaritan, comforting, and helping him readjust back into life, as well as with the robbers, pleading with them to become who God would want them to be.

Do We Have Two Gospels or One All-embracing Gospel? Is There a Salvation Gospel and a Social Gospel or the Two Sides of the Same Gospel Coin?

The scope of the Gospel may be deeper and wider than we think. It seems to me that this passage in Matthew 25—the parable of sheep and goats—is directed to challenge our narrow-mindedness. Our evangelistic gospel message prepares people for heaven but often fails to equip them for living with

dignity on earth. Sadly, there's a dichotomy in thoughts and practices of the people of Christ. Some say they preach the gospel of salvation (Matt. 1:21; Luke 19:10), while they criticize others for preaching a social gospel, liberation gospel or being justice minded (Mic. 6:8). Those in the former group carry tracts and distribute Bibles, while the latter groups distribute food and clothes. Some brag they are pro-life in doctrine and defend the right of the fetus to live, but after the fetus becomes human, they have no qualms taking away his life by sentencing him to years of incarceration for frivolous reasons. Jesus probably hinted on both salvation and social gospels in John 10:10b—"have life" [salvation for the soul] and "have life to the full" or "life more abundantly" [social gospel; living life with dignity, salvation for body and mind].

There's an unsettling high point from this parable of sheep and goats. It appears that there's a checklist at the Pearly Gate and it's not what we think it should be. It sounds more like work-based requirements for getting through the Pearly Gate. Before you are granted the pass of entry at the Pearly Gate, the checklist is not (1) Are you saved? (2) Are you a tither? (3) How many souls did you lead to Christ, or (4) How many were baptized in your ministry? Strangely, and this is where it is perplexing, at least to me, the question is: (1) Did you feed the hungry? (2) Did you clothe the naked? (3) Did you visit the sick? (4) Did you visit the incarcerated? As a thoroughbred Evangelical (not the political brand of it), I'm afraid that while evangelism is always important with hospitality, helping to meet social and biological needs seems to score higher than we think as the parable bears out. Judaism places emphasis on deed not creed, on doing good works over having correct dogma or content of faith.

While James, the apostle, fell short of advocating "deed not creed", as in Judaism, he, nonetheless, established that deed is the evidence of creed. That correct creed is validated by corresponding deed is evident in James' book, which is so practical, so deed or work-oriented, and so down-to-earth that it sometimes reads like a classical Old Testament Wisdom literature. James writes, in chapter 2:14-18,

14What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? 17Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

18But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

Did Jesus feed the hungry and heal the sick so He could gain their undivided attention to be able to preach the kingdom to them, or did He do those things, because they were the right things to do and there was a need for them? People were sick, hungry and famished. I promise to re-read my New Testament, but so far I cannot justify that Jesus healed the sick or fed the crowd as precursor to preaching, or opportunity for Him to preach to the crowd. The recorded instances of Jesus feeding the 5000 men besides women and children (Matt. 14:13-21), and 4000 men besides women and children (Matt. 15:32-39) and the meals at the beach for His disciples (Jn. 21:1-14) did not indicate that Jesus used food as baits to entice them to listen to Him. He had clearly preached and healed the sick before feeding them. Jesus fed them out of compassion for their famished condition so they wouldn't faint on their way home. The communal food, the breaking of bread and eating together were part of the benediction and dismissal formalities. In both cases, Jesus practiced hospitality and generosity (Jn. 6:4-6), typical of His Jewish culture. They were also reminiscent of Yahweh who, rain or shine, had spread a table for His people, the Israelites, in the wilderness—Psalm 78:19; John 6:31-35.

In John 21, there was no bargaining before Jesus provided breakfast for His disciples. Jesus met with them in the moment of their greatest biological and psychological needs. They had fished all night and caught nothing. They were disappointed, cold, wet, discouraged, emotionally deflated, diminished, hungry, and probably, angry at themselves for having embarked on the fruitless venture. Jesus then showed up. No chiding, no sermonizing. Jesus provided

them with what they needed: warmth from the fire He had started, baked bread, smoked fish, and a miraculous catch of fish. Unlike Jesus, I'm afraid, sometimes, even when not clearly enunciated, our attitude is something like this: "If you take my gospel tract, then I'll give you food and clothing; if you listen to me preach, then you can sit and eat to your satisfaction and also have something to take home as well." Nonetheless, food is a great way of getting a hearing for the gospel or a political discourse.

As a matter of fact, visitation is the primary way of conveying love and care. Can we ever love from a distance, without social connection or contact, and call it genuine love? Even God demonstrated His love by visiting the Earth, becoming like one of us, sharing our space, eating human food, and breathing in our air. We read in the Bible that God visited Adam, Abraham, and many others. Bible teachers have a word for it, "theophany", or pre-Bethlehem appearances of God or Jesus. God is not an absent landlord in His created world. God is both immanence and transcendence.

Granted that we visit the sick, house the homeless and cloth the naked—things that good people in every culture do—are we prepared to go beyond doing the good to doing the strange but closest and dearest to God's heart? Are we ready to be the conduit pipe for God-infused loving care for the derelicts, imprisoned criminals, and villains? Do we, in any way, feel the heart of Jesus and consider those He had in mind when He said the "other sheep not yet in the fold" (Jn. 10:16)? Are we ready to practice radical, senseless love, which is God's type of love? Is our heart or hospitality large enough to include ALL or is it selective to those we consider worthy of it? Do we value life? Do black lives matter? Do all lives matter?

The Spin Jesus Put on Old Religious Ideas: The Story/Parable of the Good Samaritan

The scholar who posed the question to Jesus was well versed in Scriptures. He might have questioned Jesus out of a desire to learn more from Him, to know Jesus' position on the topic or the rabbinic school Jesus subscribed to, or to strike a conversation, or initiate an argument. He asked the question,

not because he was clueless, but probably asked the question either to take issue with Jesus or to see what kind of teacher He was. Whatever his motives, he asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). Jesus asked him what’s written in the Law. Effortlessly, he recited the summation of the Law—love God completely and love your neighbor as yourself. To which Jesus said, “Live it out.” To justify himself he said, in essence, “The real problem is ‘Who is my neighbor?’” Jesus then told the parable to show who proved to be a neighbor.

In Jesus’ story, which we call “The Story of the Good Samaritan”, the priest and Levite were not the perpetrators of a crime and were in no way responsible for the victim’s misfortune. They saw the victim, their fellow Jew, who had been robbed of his livelihood and stabbed nearly to death, lying in his pool of blood and walked past him on the other side. They did not become involved, and they could have legitimate reasons for not being involved. Their reasons could be based on their understanding of the laws of their God. They might have legitimate reasons to avoid the risk of becoming defiled from contact with blood, the dead or dying while they pursued their sacred duties to man and God (Lev. 21:1; Num. 19:11; Lam. 4:14). We could judge that to be fanatical obedience to purity laws. The Pharisees loved Jesus’ company and frequently invited Jesus and His disciples to dinner in their houses. The only problem they had with Jesus was over the Sabbath and claiming divinity; that is, calling Himself “Son of God.”

Jesus told the parable to show who proved to be a neighbor. In verse 35, the two silver coins were worth two days’ wages and would keep the victim in the inn for about two months. He must have been badly beaten. It also demonstrated the total care the Samaritan provided. The story teaches that being a neighbor is more than being friendly or being nice. Being a neighbor means being sensitive to others’ problems and being willing to help. Anyone who passes by a person in need is not being a neighbor. Do you know anyone who is hurting or has a problem? Right now, that person is your neighbor. You can be a Good Samaritan to him or her. It is not proximity, religion, relationship, or race that determines neighborliness. It’s the need. It is also

recognizing that divinity or better yet “the providence of God”, not an accident, has brought one to the scene of the need where one could make a difference in another life.

The spin in the story is the sharp contrast between the Temple workers—the priest and Levite—the custodians of the law and models of morality in contrast to the action of the outcast, the Samaritan, with an impure form of religion, becoming the symbol of godliness. At the end of the story, when Jesus asked the lawyer, the questioner, who the true neighbor had been to the victim, the lawyer couldn’t even bring himself to mention the word, “Samaritan,” that’s how much the Jews despised them. In the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, (found in John 4:19-24), Jesus had corrected the woman, saying, “You [the Samaritans] worship what you do not know; we [the Jews] know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews,” (v. 22; insert mine). Yet, here was the Samaritan, credited with an impure form of religion, glowing in the story.

The hallmark of Judaism is hospitality or generosity. It’s commanded, demanded and expected. Yet these religious leaders failed woefully to provide hospitality. Recall Abraham’s hospitality to angels in Genesis 18, Lot’s hospitality to two angels in Genesis 19, the Levite’s concubine in Judges 19 where the hostile community withheld hospitality. John the Baptist distilled the essence of their religion in his answer to the inquirers he had baptized: “So the people asked him, saying, ‘What shall we do then?’ He [John the Baptist] answered and said to them, ‘He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise,’ (Luke 3:10, 11). It boils down to loving your neighbor. Likewise, the admonition in Hebrews 13:1, 2 is to show hospitality to strangers.

The Good Samaritan, with an impure form of monotheistic religion, was the one who truly understood who his neighbor was (Lev. 19:18). He, not the priest or Levite, was the one who reached out in love to his neighbor (Matt. 5:43; 19:19; 22:39). The Samaritan was the one who answered—or better still, became the answer to—the lawyer’s question: “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). Jesus concluded with, “Go and do likewise,” (Luke 10:37).

In the epistles, we read that love for one's neighbor is the summary, or the fulfillment, of the entire Law—Rom. 13:8, 9; Gal. 5:14; Jam. 2:8. “For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,’” (Gal. 5:14; emphasis added).

Concerning a Jewish enemy's livestock or property, Moses, whom the Jewish leaders regarded as a foremost prophet and giver of the Law had said, “If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it,” (Exo. 23:4, 5). That ox or donkey is their enemy's source of livelihood. On one hand, Moses enjoined them to be merciful to an enemy of theirs (don't let him lose his source of income). On the other hand, Moses enjoined them to be merciful to an animal (how we treat the vulnerable, the helpless or the lost, including animals, is always a true sign of spirituality). In the story, we don't have an animal or an enemy in need. Here was a fellow Jew, not an enemy and not even a livestock, in need of help and the religious leaders just walked past him. Who came to the man's rescue? Who else, but the outcast with imperfect religious ideas! That's the twist.

It is a question of how do you see, with your eyes or your heart? How do you want to be seen or noticed? The key verse in the story of the Good Samaritan is 10:33, 34—when he SAW him, he had COMPASSION on him, and he WENT to him. He saw what and who others did not see. He had compassion on him. Compassion comes from two Latin words, meaning “to suffer with” or “to suffer together.” The Good Samaritan vicariously entered the victim's suffering, something which the priest and Levite did not. He therefore became a co-sufferer with the man. Compassion is different from sympathy or pity. With pity or sympathy, you may shake your head, shed a tear and walk away, but not with compassion. Compassion is always love in action, love that has hands and feet. He jumped into action.

I submit to you two reasons that we fail to provide ministry. One is rigidity in our Bible interpretation or pick-and-choose what's convenient at a particular time. The one reason we fail to provide ministry is that we con-

sider our Bible teaching, our choir rehearsal, ushering, the real ministry rather than loving our neighbor as ourselves or feeding the poor or nursing a sick homeless man. We (especially some conservative Christians in the US) are so rigid with our keeping of the smallest parts of the law that grace and mercy become foreign to us. The way we have chosen to interpret and understand our Bible—the letters of the law that kills—may be the key to hindrance in ministry of grace. The hypocritical Pharisees had no problem with untying their livestock, watering and feeding them on Sabbath, they would circumcise a child on the Sabbath to obey Moses but had a problem when Jesus healed a woman who had been sick for 18 years on the Sabbath (Luke 13:15, 16). It was the same attitude when Jesus healed a man with a withered hand (Luke 6:6-11). They were blind to people.

The second reason we draw back from ministry is to save our skin, or, in the US, to avoid litigation and lawsuit. Unless you are a professional or licensed healthcare worker and do so with prior permission of the sick or fallen or dying to help him or her, you dare not help to lift up a fallen person. You restrain yourself from helping for fear that you might be accused of complicating the situation by the way you cared. I also suspect the priest and Levite ran away, because they wanted to save their own skins, out of fear, for self-preservation, which is one reason we often fail to provide ministry. When we feel our lives are also endangered if we stoop to help, we are bound to run. Possibly the priest and Levite felt if they stopped to help, the robbers might still be close by and could come to harm and rob them as well. However, the Good Samaritan put his own safety on the line and took the risk to save another life.

Jesus' parable ended with the victim in the inn being taken care of, with the Good Samaritan's deposit and promissory note to foot the entire expense. In the days after the incident, where do we find good people, the religious people? You guess right if you say, at the inn, visiting, helping and praying for the victim. Good people generally do that. What is the society's attitude to the robbers at this time, especially if they've been caught and heading for the courts? Good people show their righteous indignation as they chant: LOCK

THEM UP AND THROW AWAY THE KEY; THEY DON'T DESERVE TO LIVE IN COMMUNITY. Where do you find the chaplain? Did you say, at the side of the victim in the inn and at the side of the robbers in the court/jail? Why? They are found there, because they believe that human beings are redeemable. Radical love is reckless love; it's God's love. The chaplain ministers to both the victim and victimizers. They are motivated by love—God's reckless love, love that's beyond good reasoning. God offers grace and mercy to the victims and their victimizers and the chaplain does the same. We see God in action through their services.

Have We Not All One Father? Has Not One God Created Us? (Mal. 2:10)

“Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?” rhetorically quizzed the prophet Malachi. According to Malachi if we all emanate from one divine Source, then we should treat each other as equals, as brothers and sisters, as members of one big family.

There is a Jewish tradition or legend that put a spin on the story we read about the exodus of Israelites from Egyptian bondage. As we read from the book of Exodus, God parted the Red Sea when Moses lifted his rod. The tradition says something about God's reaction after the Red Sea parted by the power of God. The Israelites marched across and escaped Egypt's bondage. The Egyptian army pursuing them died and perished in the Sea. Miriam, Moses' sister, took a tambourine and led the people in a joyous song of praise and celebration—Exo. 15. Even the angels sang, danced, and rejoiced as they witnessed the great salvation of God. God told the angels not to join in the celebration of the people of Israel, because his children, the Egyptians, had died. This Jewish tradition portrayed God's universal love for all peoples.

According to the legend, while Israelite men, women, boys, and girls on earth were rejoicing and angels and archangels in heaven were also jubilating, an archangel looked at the face of God and was puzzled: God wasn't happy. The Archangel then asked God, “You don't look happy, why? Your children have safely crossed the Red Sea and are no longer enslaved to Egypt. The

Egyptian army had been drowned, why aren't you looking happy?" To which God said, "Yes, my children have safely crossed the Red Sea, but my other children have drowned in the Red Sea." Yes, only God can love both the oppressed and their oppressors and only God can regard them both as His children. That's the calling of a chaplain: to love and minister to both the oppressed and their oppressors, to help both the victims and their victimizers.

Reality Check for my Faithful Volunteers

I often quiz my volunteers, not because I need any answer, but because I want them to think about it. Most inmates are not misguided; they are criminals who have done terrible things to their fellow human beings. I sometimes tell them: "Some of these inmates are in prison, because they've committed violent crimes such as rape, robbery, arson or murder. The lady they raped or robbed hasn't been herself ever since. She can no longer function as she used to do. She can't trust anybody, always anxious and fearful of anything and anyone. She's living in a new world order now, because her sense of safety and security at home and in the streets has been shattered. Having been betrayed and violated she's afraid to venture out and make friends or go to parties. Now, she's traumatized, always having nightmares and PTSD (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder).

"Suppose one of the inmates in this jail was the one who had raped your sister, sibling, or wife, would you still be coming here to lead Bible study, knowing that the man is sitting there across from you? If you do, how would you disclose that to your sister, sibling, or wife when you get back home after leading Bible study in jail? Will you make it back here again?" As I said, I don't expect an answer, but I don't want them to have a false sense of prison ministry, either. Some inmates are career criminals, and some are demon-possessed beings who have sold their souls to Satan. The penal system is broken and lopsided. Not every inmate deserves to be incarcerated. Injustice is pervasive in the system. That notwithstanding, according to Jay Lewis, the only reason you and I can have a restful sleep tonight is because some reprobates, scoundrels, or crooks are locked up and are sleeping in jail.

Happily, some inmates have changed or have been changed. They no longer have the kind of mindset and reasoning they had before incarceration; they are not person that they were before coming to jail. HOW CAN ANYONE PROVE THAT, because they've not been tested? Here is an illustration of what I mean: Your friend said, "I quit smoking for good. It's killing me. I will never touch a cigarette again. I've been coughing and breathless for days." You asked, "When did you quit?" He said, "This morning; about 2 hours ago." You chuckled. Why? That's good intention. Has he really kicked the habit? Only time will tell. You'll believe his story after 3 years of not smoking. In like manner, only time will show true conversion of anyone—inmate or civilian church go-er.

Revisiting the Story of "The Good Samaritan" and Using the Love Test in Decision-making

Here is my propositional statement or suggested principle for life; one of the favorite sayings of Dr. Wayne W. Dyer:

"If You Had to Choose Between Being Right,
Or Being Kind,
Please Choose Kindness."
(Dr. Wayne W. Dyer)

Why is it that the priest and Levite in the parable don't score high in the courts of public opinion? Simply: The priest and Levite chose to be right above being kind. They did not apply the love test. Some readers rationalize, or try to, that the priest and Levite probably didn't get involved in obedience to their ceremonial cleansing laws. They are also bothered with the problem of whether they were supposed to disobey the law and become defiled in the process. They reason that, if indeed, the priest and Levite could have chosen not to help so as not to be defiled, in obedience to their purity and defilement ceremonial laws, their response could then be justified. Today, no one reads or listens to the story and takes sides with the priest or Levite for their obser-

vance of these purity laws. Why? They had failed to obey the Higher Laws of Nature. If they had stopped to help, the worst that could happen was for them to be late and/or defiled by contact with the dead or blood. This would not be a problem, because the Levitical laws had provision for cleansing if one suddenly came in contact with the dead and thus became defiled. At worst, they could be quarantined for a maximum of seven days. If that had happened, the priest and Levite would have saved a life and the story could have had a better, different, humane ending.

What is this Higher Law? It is the LOVE TEST. Does this action or intended action pass the Love Test? The scriptures say in Romans,

8 Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:8-10).

Neighbor love is the final test, v. 10: Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. The LOVE TEST is the one overriding test. The question always is: Does it pass the Love Test?

For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal. 5:14). Again, neighbor love is the final test.

8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; ... 13 For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment (Jam. 2:8, 13). Neighbor love is the ROYAL LAW, v. 8

34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34, 35). Love is the New Commandment, the final test

Regarding the issue of Sabbath, which the Pharisees always contended with Jesus against, the love test might have helped. Which would pass the

LOVE TEST: To heal on the Sabbath or withhold healing on Sabbath? For example, the incident of Mark 3,

- 1 And He [Jesus] entered the synagogue again, and a man was there who had a withered hand.
- 2 So they watched Him closely, whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him.
- 3 And He said to the man who had the withered hand, “Step forward.”
- 4 Then He said to them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they kept silent.
- 5 And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other.
- 6 Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him (Mark 3:1-6).

In Matthew 12, with regards to His disciples picking grains on the stalk to eat on a Sabbath, Jesus chose kindness, that is food for the hungry, above the law of Sabbath and was criticized for it.

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!” (vv. 1, 2).

The Pharisees had no problem with the disciples picking the grains and eating them; their laws allowed that. They had problem that the picking and rubbing, which they considered as work, were being done on the Sabbath and Jesus had consented to it.

The Pharisees always had a beef with Jesus over the Sabbath, because Jesus ALWAYS chose kindness—for example, healing, above Sabbath worship or

being meticulously right about Sabbath. The Pharisees accused Jesus of allowing His disciples to do that which was not permissible on the Sabbath. The offense of Jesus' disciples was that they were picking grain to eat, because they were hungry. Observance of the Sabbath was a thorny issue for the Pharisees, even though they would feed their livestock and circumcise a child on the Sabbath to keep circumcision law. Jesus would rather obey a higher law and nourish biological needs or physical need for healing on the Sabbath than sending them away sick and hungry simply to keep Moses' Law.

To defend Himself on this occasion, Jesus cited two precedents from the Old Testament. The first precedent was David, the revered king and psalmist of Israel, and Ahimelech the priest. Ahimelech the priest chose kindness above the Law and wasn't struck dead by God. The story is in 1 Samuel 21:1-9. David, the fugitive, running away for his dear life from the demented king Saul, had come to Ahimelech, the priest and asked for food. None was available except the holy bread for Temple workers only, unlawful for David and his men. However, Ahimelech upheld the higher law of feeding the hungry (Matt. 12:3, 4). He had a choice to send David and his men away famished, because there was no common bread to spare. He gave the sacred bread, reserved for sanctified Temple workers, to famished, ordinary, possibly blood-stained, soldiers. In like manner, Jesus had allowed His disciples to pick grain and eat on the Sabbath, because the higher law of kindness prevailed (Matt. 12:1, 2). The principle is that it is better to err on the side of love, mercy and kindness than being self-righteous and judgmental.

The second precedent Jesus cited had to do with the priests. The priests worked on the Sabbath and were not guilty of profaning the Sabbath. Everything the priests did in performance of their duties were chores and work forbidden for ordinary citizens of the land. The priests work on the Sabbath, because a higher law of worship and service to the community prevailed (Matt. 12:5, 6). Jesus cited the priests and all they do on the Sabbath to show the inconsistency of the Pharisees in applying their manmade rules of the Sabbath. Why would some activities be allowed and justified for a group on the Sabbath and not be acceptable for other groups?

Jesus chose kindness above being right in the story of the woman who was reportedly caught in adultery. Granted, the woman's accusers did not bring the man, as the law required; it takes two to commit adultery. Granted also that the intention was not the woman but to use the occasion to trap Jesus. Yet, the Law and Moses were on the side of the Pharisees (John 8:1-12, cf. Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). They had a valid point. No true prophet of Israel would say or do anything contrary to Moses. If Jesus could go against Moses, that would discredit Him before the people. If He sided with Moses and upheld stoning the poor woman, the common men would lose faith in Jesus. Besides, that would put Jesus in trouble with the political powers of the ruling Roman government. Omniscient Jesus, however, found a way to show kindness and mercy, without going against Moses, which had been the Pharisee's intention, and without also being pitted against Rome, for demanding capital punishment. Although their religious laws suggested stoning such a person, they did not have the power to carry out capital punishment at that time, being under Roman domination. The principle is that no one goes wrong when he or she is acting in love. "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal. 5:14). "And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13).

Back to the Good Samaritan story. The failure of the priest and Levite in addition to (1) their limited understanding of Scripture, (2) fear of personal safety, (3) busyness in ministry, (4) major in the minor, minor in the major, could as well be (5) that they had a lower regard for human life, or less value of "the other" person's life than their own. To them he was, the disposable and dispensable, "the last, least, lost and the left-out," but not to God. Another unsettling high point from this parable is that we don't decide who is worthy. "The other sheep I have that are not of this sheep pen" may be the today's hellraiser in the neighborhood. The bully, or the notorious Saul of Tarsus today could be the Apostle Paul of tomorrow.

The Golden Rule Test

When in doubt, apply the golden rule: What if I was in his shoes? What if I was him?

The Golden Rule Test: DO UNTO OTHERS FIRST WHAT YOU WANT DONE TO YOU. How do I want to be treated, listened to, or responded to? You will act differently if you think less of other's feelings and only of your feelings and public image. We can be sure that we are on God's side (or like our Father-God) when we show LOVE, CARE, GENEROSITY, GRACE, and MERCY.

"Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 7:12; The Golden Rule).

"And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise" (Luke 6:31; Golden Rule).

This much we also know from the Beatitudes:

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7).

"Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful" (Lk. 6:36).

Jesus taught that all the Old Testament burnt offerings and sacrifices were insufficient for forgiveness or salvation without the mercy of God. He said, "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matt. 12:7). James categorically stated in his epistle, "Mercy triumphs over judgment," (Jam. 2:13b).

As a rule: It's better to err on the side of love and mercy.

Humane Treatment for Captives or Prisoners of War was the Expectation

With the exception of holy wars (such as, Deut. 20:16-18; Joshua chapters 6 through 10; 1 Sam. 15), which Yahweh mandated as judgment, to prevent widespread corruption of true monotheistic religion and, especially, for the preservation of the holy Messianic line; the general tone was humane treatment. The Holy wars would come in the same category as the universal flood in Noah's generation, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

These destructions were a total, complete annihilation of all living things. They served as examples of a holy Deity's righteous indignation and prerogative to punish and wipe out any nation or people for their extreme violence and wickedness in His created world. The worldwide destruction from the Flood and the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah were by direct divine acts while God commissioned kings and nations as God's rod of discipline to carry out other holy wars. Though the Judeo-Christian scripture is silent or not forthright on the issue, a survey of practices and Old Testament historical precedents lean heavily in favor of humanitarian and compassionate treatment of captives of war as the expectation. However, because of the human vengeful spirit, bitterness, and unhealthy rivalry, humaneness was not always the case. Unfortunately, sometimes captives and prisoners of war were tortured (2 Sam. 12:31), blinded (Judg. 16:21), maimed (Judg. 1:6, 7), ravished (Lam. 5:11-13), enslaved (2 Kgs. 5:2), killed (1 Sam. 15:32,33) wiped out (Num. 31:1-24) or deported to other lands (2 Kgs. 15:27-31; 17:1-23).

In Deuteronomy 21:10-14, we read of the humane instructions given in respect of the treatment of women captured in war. In 2 Chronicles 28:9-15, we read another account of how the prophet of God cried against the inhuman treatment and shameful acts against the prisoners of war. The leaders of the conquering nation heeded the warning of the prophet. They repented, clothed, and fed the prisoners, and thereafter, sent them back to their homeland. It may be argued, however, that in the first example, the humane treatment was towards women that the captors wanted to marry. Nothing was said about the males that were captured. It can also be argued in the second case, that kinship was the reason given for a change of heart. The nation that was conquered was Judah. It was defeated by Israel. Both Judah, southern tribes, and Israel, northern tribes, were descendants of Jacob and were at one time the 12 tribes of Israel, a United Kingdom of Israel under Kings David and Solomon.

However, in 2 Kings 6:8-23, we read of the contingent of the Syrian army that was sent to capture Elisha. Syria and Israel were warring neighbor nations. Without provocation from Israel, Syria was menacing Israel (v. 8)

but wasn't gaining head way because of Elisha, the prophet. Elisha had the ability to discern the plans of the king of Syria even before they were hatched. Elisha would then warn the king of Israel. Israel would deploy a garrison of soldiers to guard the intended cities the Syrians were planning to invade. This infuriated and frustrated the king of Syria. He therefore sent a battalion of soldiers to capture Elisha and bring him to Syria. When they came to where Elisha the prophet was, the prophet prayed that the army would be blinded. Elisha then led them to the center of the city. By the time the eyes of the Syrian soldiers were open, and they regained self-consciousness, they were amid their enemies, completely encircled. When the king of Israel realized this cheap victory, that his enemies had been delivered to him and were helpless and surrounded, he thought of putting them to death. Elisha stepped in.

21 Now when the king of Israel saw them [Syrian soldiers], he said to Elisha, "My father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?"

. But he [Elisha] answered, "You shall not kill them. Would you kill those whom you have taken captive with your sword and your bow? Set food and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their master." 23 Then he prepared a great feast for them; and after they ate and drank, he sent them away and they went to their master. So the bands of Syrian raiders came no more into the land of Israel.

The rhetorical question of Elisha in verse 22c, speaks volumes. Elisha asked, "Would you kill those whom you have taken captive with your sword and your bow?" This rhetorical question very likely implies (1) that it was not the normal practice to kill prisoners of war, and (2) that even those captured in war enjoyed some rights to life. It is also worthy of note that, because of hospitality Israel showed to their defenseless enemies, "the bands of Syrian raiders came no more into the land of Israel" (v. 23).

God had used the Assyrians and Babylonians as His "rod of discipline" to punish His rebellious people, Israel, for Israel's idolatry. God even called each ruler of these Gentile nations, "My servant." God addressed Nebuchadnezzar as Jehovah's servant (Jer. 27:6, 8; 43:10; Eze. 29:18-20), and Cyrus as "My anointed," "My shepherd," or chosen one (Isa. 44:28; 45:1). However,

these nations were excessive in their destructive carnage, cruelty, and inhuman treatment that God again decided to punish them for their inhumane treatment of Israel (Isaiah chapters 10, 13 and 47; Jeremiah chapters 50 and 51). Against the arrogance of Assyria, God said through prophet Isaiah, “Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation... I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his haughty looks” (Isa. 10:5, 12c). Against Babylon, the prophet declared, “I was angry with My people; I have profaned My inheritance, and given them into your hand. You showed them no mercy; on the elderly you laid your yoke very heavily... Therefore evil shall come upon you; you shall not know from where it arises. And trouble shall fall upon you; you will not be able to put it off. And desolation shall come upon you suddenly, which you shall not know” (Isa. 47:6, 11). The Assyrian and Babylonian armies went too far and were merciless in the way they carried out Yahweh’s decree. They thereby themselves incurred Yahweh’s judgment for their wanton destruction and disregard for life (Jer. 50:18). God’s judgment was never without mercy, but these nations that God had used as “the rod of [His] anger” were merciless, brutal, and coldblooded.

The book of Obadiah details God’s anger and punishment for Edom, a kindred nation to Israel, for gloating over the destruction of Israel. The Edomites were descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob and grandson of Abraham. They were descended from Jacob’s brother Esau, and still carried the grudge their founder had for Jacob’s deception. They refused to help Israel in their need, sold them as slaves, and even abused them while they were exiled to Babylon. Edom was not responsible for the pillage but did not help and even handed over to the invading army those who had escaped the war. This family tie should have incited compassion for Israel’s plight; instead, it made Edom’s actions even more repulsive, since they were opposing not only God’s chosen people but also their own relatives. Edom was doomed for her apathy and unsympathetic stance.

Proper Burial Following Capital Punishment

In Deuteronomy 21, verses 22 and 23, we read,

If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God.

This was a man who had been condemned for his crime and put to death by hanging. Human vengeance and insatiable desire for justice would have the man hanging for days, or even burnt on the stake. Reminiscent of lynching in the dark, horrid and gory not-so-long days of US history, self-righteous (and racist) men and women in society would yell at the condemned and dying, “Good riddance! He’s not worthy to live. Let him rot there on the tree. Let the birds feed on his carcass.” Nonetheless, even the man that had been condemned to death by hanging was God’s image bearer, made in the image and likeness of God. Though deformed by evil and crime he was nonetheless God’s original masterpiece. God decreed a burial, a humane treatment of his remains to validate the inherent dignity of his life, which no crime could erase.

My friend and colleague, Chaplain (Dr.) Gideon Jebamani presently serves as Protestant chaplain in a New York State prison facility. His facility has a burial ground for inmates who die while incarcerated and whose remains the family or next-of-kin does not claim. The practice had been to bury such inmates with only their DINs (Department Identification Numbers), on the tombstone. Gideon told them that his faith did not permit him to do burial with a DIN number. He therefore requested putting the inmate’s name and they gave permission. Now they use both the inmate’s name and the DIN number on the tombstone. A deceased inmate is still a person with a name, a first and family names. Deceased inmates are now to be buried, not as a number in the penal system, but as free human beings, with their names on their tombstones, albeit, alongside their DINs. Though their family members did not claim the remains of a deceased inmate who died in prison, they are,

in some way, afforded dignity and respect as part of humanity.

Restorative Justice Versus Criminal Justice

As my colleague, the Jewish chaplain, was kind enough to explain to me, the Jewish concept of justice, when the Jews were self-ruling under rabbinic courts some two millennia ago, was akin to restorative justice. Modern day Israel, however, like many other nations of the world, has a prison system. Restorative justice seeks to address the hurts and needs of the victims, and the hurts and needs of the offenders in such a way that they and the community are healed. Restorative justice examines the harmful impact of a crime and then determines what can be done to repair that harm while holding the person who caused it accountable for his or her actions. Accountability for the offender means accepting responsibility and acting to repair the harm done. It focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community at large. The three big ideas are: (1) repair: crime causes harm and justice requires repairing that harm; (2) encounter: usually through a mediator, neutral person, or religious leaders to avoid or minimize being confrontational; the best way to determine how to do that is to have the parties decide together; and (3) transformation: this can cause fundamental changes in people, relationships and communities.

Restorative justice is community oriented and community centered and therefore includes victims of crimes, social offenders, and families of all, putting emphasis on restoring wholeness to the community by restoration of those affected by crime. Restorative justice views crime as more than breaking the law – it also causes harm to people, relationships, and the community. It is a theory of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior.

Criminal justice on the other hand is the delivery of justice to those who have committed crimes. Three main components make up the criminal justice system: law enforcement, courts, and corrections. The criminal justice system addresses the consequences of criminal behavior in society and has the objective of protecting peoples' right to safety and the enjoyment of

human rights.

Criminal justice defines crime as a violation against the state; restorative justice defines crime as a violation of one person to another. Criminal justice relies upon a technical process of legal rules; restorative justice relies upon the mending of relationships and gives attention to repairing social injury. Criminal justice defines accountability as receiving punishment; restorative justice defines accountability as understanding the impact of one's action, and making amends for that action. Criminal justice includes a debt owed to the state and society; restorative justice calls for realizing a debt to the victim and community. The primary institutions of the criminal justice system are the police, prosecution and defense lawyers, the courts, and prisons.

Criminal justice (a retributive system) hands out justice through guilt, punishment, and vengeance; restorative justice focuses on justice through enablement and real accountability. Restorative justice therefore holds the offender accountable to the individual victim and the specific community affected by the crime and requires the offender to take direct responsibility to make things right again, to the degree this is possible.

Conclusion

Have you ever paused to ask why the Good Samaritan in Jesus' classic parable by the same title (found in Luke 10:25-37) stopped to help a victim of armed robbers, who'd been violated and wounded? The victim was a total stranger of another nationality. The Samaritan stopped to help at the risk of his own wellbeing on the lonely dangerous road. Why did he bother? The answer is simple: It's the right thing to do. By that, though he remained unnamed, he earned the prefix "Good" for his Samaritan clan. On the other hand, the religious leaders, the Priest and Levite, who had earlier been on the site but did not stop to help the wounded man, for whatever reasons, did not score high in the courts of public opinion. Why? They had failed to recognize our shared humanity, our commonalities, and human connectedness. To them, he was not a neighbor. When one member of the human race is exalted or elevated, all humanity appreciates for valuing the individual. Sadly, when one member

is trampled upon, we all fall and our collective dignity plummets because one of us is devalued.

Why do we engage in prison ministry? Think with me along these lines, please.

1. It is the right thing to do. It honors God. It affirms that fallen humanity created in the image and likeness of God is loved and redeemable.
2. Scriptures enjoin it—Heb. 13:2, 3; Isa. 42:6-8.
3. Not to do so borders on the sin of omission—Matt. 25; Jam. 4:17.
4. In Mark 16:15, Jesus commands the eyewitnesses of His resurrection, *“And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.’”* How can we go into the entire world and leave out the prisons and prisoners, especially knowing the millions behind the bars in US prisons?²³
5. In John 10:16, Jesus said, *“And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.”* Could Jesus be referring to criminals or felons as “other sheep... not of this fold”?
6. Jesus extended salvation to the scoundrel, Zacchaeus, the tax collector, even calling the fraudster, “son of Abraham.” *“And Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost,’”* (Lk. 19:9, 10). Shouldn’t we be in the business of seeking to save and not destroying “the lost”?

23. The United States has the highest prison and jail population (2,121,600 in adult facilities in 2016), and the highest incarceration rate in the world (655 per 100,000 population in 2016). As of 2016, 2.3 million people were incarcerated in the United States, at a rate of 698 people per 100,000. Total correctional population (prison, jail, probation, parole) peaked in 2007. In 2008 the US had around 24.7% of the world’s 9.8 million prisoners. Some other sources state that as of June 2020, the United States had the highest number of incarcerated individuals worldwide, with more than 2.12 million people in prison. However, the number of people incarcerated in state and federal prisons and local jails in the United States dropped from around 2.1 million in 2019 to 1.8 million by mid-2020—a 14 percent decrease.

7. To uplift one member of the human race is to advance the entire human race altogether. To denigrate one is to cheapen the entire human race.
8. If indeed *“God so loved the world”* and I can look into anyone’s face and say, “God loves you,” why should the bearer of the message do any less?
9. Visiting those in prison passes the love test, the unconditional love, which comes from God. Need, not proximity, defines who a neighbor is. My neighbor is anyone in need that I am able to help and show God’s love to.
10. It testifies to the redemptive power of our message and mission. Apostle Paul, erstwhile a notorious persecutor of the church of Christ, said, *“This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief,”* (1 Tim. 1:15).
11. 2 Corinthians 5:19: If indeed, *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation,”* who else needs to hear that message other than the outcast of society locked up in prison?
12. The inmate is not an island. To somebody out there in the community, he or she is still a father, child, mother, grandfather or grandmother, uncle, aunt, nephew, sibling, cousin, classmate, etc. Ministering to inmates is therefore beneficial to the community and necessary for recovery of soul, not only for the inmate, but also for the hundreds who are connected and related to the inmate.
13. It is choosing kindness above being right, a good principle for living suggested by Dr. Dyer. “If you had the choice between being right and being kind, choose kindness.”
14. Love and hospitality foster positive energy and positive feelings whereas hate and vengeance are negative energies that produce negative feelings.
15. Lastly, to hear the King say, in the end,

“Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Matt. 25:34-40).

12 SELF REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Who is my neighbor today? Who can I bless with a visit or text or phone call? How can I be the answer/miracle to someone’s prayer?
2. Like the religious leaders in the story, how am I, or how are we, also guilty of good religion (full-gospel) but bad practice that lacks genuine love?
3. How do I see people? With my eyes or heart? Does my caring go deep enough into my pocket, or doing anything and everything but leaving my checkbook out of the equation? The Good Samaritan spent his own money to help save another person—a complete stranger.
4. In what ways am I, or are we, often so dogmatic and legalistic about rightness of Biblical texts (Paul writes, “*the letter kills but the spirit gives life*”) that grace and mercy have disappeared from how we treat others? If you had a choice between being right or kind, please be kind.
5. How have you avoided ministry to save your skin, or preserve your job, or keep your social/public reputation? Discuss how easy it is to give them labels—ex-convict, deadbeat, “My Ex”, homeless, lost, maniac—so we can then keep our comfortable religious distance.
6. How do you understand or practice hospitality? To those who can repay or those who cannot repay you back? (see Luke 14:12-14).
7. Visitation is a primary way of conveying love. God could have loved us from heaven—from the cozy distance of heaven, and He had

always loved us. However, God's love became meaningful when God visited our planet and neighborhood (John 1:14). How is visitation—to the sick, prisoners, orphans, family, friends—an integral part of your ministry?

8. Is there a victimizer or bully who God may be calling you to reach out to, forgive, and embrace? Do you have a story or testimony about this?
9. In the story of the Good Samaritan, most religious and good people in the society would visit and help the victim but their position to the victimizer, the perpetrators of the crime would be a call for justice. Yet, a chaplain is one who ministers to both the victim and his villain, how does that make you feel, and how does that present you to the public and family members? What do family and friends think about you for engaging or choosing to engage in such ministry? Do they warn you to let them alone—"those people are criminals"?
10. What do you think of the Jewish tradition that presented a God that delivers from the oppressed yet loved both the oppressor and oppressed as His children? What if that tradition truly depicts God? How should that inform our prayer for others?
11. All religions taught to be hospitable, to visit and help the poor, the orphans, the widows and those who've fallen on hard times, because they are going through vicissitudes of life. None considered the prisoner serving punishment for the wrongs they've done in life worthy of such. Yet, Jesus alone included the prisoners, the rejects of society. What does that suggest to you about Jesus, the gospel message, and our practice of faith? What is the one thing that distinguishes Christianity from other religions of the world apart from GRACE? Nothing else! (C. S. Lewis).
12. What do you think of my reality check to my prison volunteers? What would it be like to visit a person (an inmate incarcerated and serving a prison term) who had robbed you and had wanted to kill

you in the process but failed simply because Providence [God] was on your side and spared your life? Have you heard any story, or do you know a victim who initiated forgiveness and reconciliation to his or her victimizer?

Theme: Christian Duty of Forgiving Others & Pursuing Peace

Dear Chaplain,

One of my friends talks behind my back and spreads false statements about me, and it hurts. I know his secrets too, and I can mess him up real good. But I am struggling with whether to pay him back in his coins or to put the matter behind me. He has been avoiding me as much as I am trying to have nothing to do with him. I think he deserves to be taught a lesson, but I also wish I could take the higher road; only I am afraid he would think I am a big fool. What do you suggest I do, and how do I go about it?

Steve

Dear Steve,

My first reflection on reading your question was to say, “Welcome to the real world,” but I knew that would not be comforting. The road to incarceration for many inmates is strewn with hurt, neglect, abandonment, disappointment, broken promises, deception, betrayal, infidelity, pent-up anger, disloyalty, and frustrations over a long period of time. I also know that for many inmates the last frontier to their complete freedom, deliverance and crossing over to a brand new life is to forgive totally all the people who have cheated, disappointed, lied on, defrauded or hurt them and let go; not tit-for-tat or seek to payback in the same coins. If they could choose to forgive and let go, not pretend the harm didn’t happen or that it didn’t damage or set them back, if they could take the high road of choosing to forgive that would not only close the door to negativity, new doors to possibilities would open beyond description.

Steve, not that your case is not important, because it is. I don't intend to minimize your problem with this friend or take anything away from it. This betrayal you complained of reminded me of an inmate I worked with for several weeks and probably months until he was transferred to another jail. This inmate attended the Protestant services and he would regularly write me to call him down to see me or would tell the CO in his dorm that he needed to see the chaplain. His dorm COs knew he was emotionally unstable, like a walking time bomb, and they would readily send him to see me, if only to help defuse a potentially volatile situation. I will share with you the focal points of the discussions I had with him during our meetings in my office before he was transferred out of our jail to another jail. I'm not sure I had much success with him though.

This inmate was serving a 25-year-to-life sentence, for the murder of an undercover police officer. His girlfriend had been faithful to him for the past 11 years since his incarceration. Lately, she had begun to cheat on him. That was problem number 1 and it was eating him up. The worst part was problem number 2: his girlfriend was sleeping with his best friend, the very friend he had asked to look after his girlfriend when he was coming to prison. This was what depressed him most and kept him sleepless night after night. At this time, he was also receiving services from the Office of Mental Health (OMH) for his deteriorating mental and emotional health. What was he to do? Or, what could he do about the case? First, as you and I know, he was limited and powerless being incarcerated; if they didn't come to visit him, he wouldn't have any contact with them. Second, you and I know that if he's ever released from jail (don't forget that he killed a cop), that would likely not happen for another decade, or more. I doubt if anything I said moved the needle forward in any way, because he kept bringing up the same argument, day after day, like a broken record.

I tried to reason with him to be thankful that, at least, for more than ten years this lady—his girlfriend—stuck with him, despite his slim chance of being released. His defense and hope for an early release was that he did not know that his victim was a cop. As they say, if you truly love anything or

anyone you don't enslave that thing or person; you set it free. True love will set free for the good of that thing or person that's beloved even if doing so is painful and hurtful to the lover. Maybe she thought it was time for her to move on. He retorted, "That does not give her any right to hook up with my best friend. My only friend! What friend? A friend who stabs you in the back when you are weakest and defenseless! After all I did for him, he's screwing my girl while I am rotting in jail. I wish I..." His attitude to the lady was possessive; he kept using the personal possessive pronoun, "my," referring to her as "my girl." His attitude to the friend was jealousy: "if I can't have her, he won't; nobody else would."

In my conversations with him I kept urging him to release them as the only option that could restore him to some degree of emotional health and sanity. If he could forgive them, if he could make peace with the situation, if he could close that chapter... if—and this was the biggest if—if he could find a space in his heart to give them his blessing then he might continue to enjoy the benefit of their friendship and support while he was incarcerated. He could just "let go and let God." As I said, I'm not sure I had much success, because he just couldn't, but I sincerely hope you would. Steve, I pray you would. I'd like to offer you some scriptures I shared with him and how I reasoned with him.

Many inmates are bent on taking revenge, to exact an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and (human) life for (human) life, in a literal sense. Unfortunately, this so-called noble practice of offense and revenge, damage and retaliation only perpetuate the cycle of violent crime, arrest, and incarceration. A Chinese proverb attributed Confucius (540 BC), stated, "When you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves." Meaning that one of the graves is for yourself—because you will be damned as well. Only forgiveness breaks that horrible cycle. Nevertheless, the fact is that, judging from our human nature, as long as we interact with one another as social beings in this fallen world, we will offend and be offended, intentionally or unintentionally. In one of His private discussions with His disciples, Jesus says offense is a given; it will happen again and again. "Then He [Jesus] said to the disciples,

‘It is impossible that no offenses should come’” (Lk. 17:1).

In the same breath, Jesus also tells them how to deal with an offending friend so that relationships do not degenerate into bitter feelings and resentment. Jesus uses several parables to teach us the necessity to forgive one another. In all instances, Jesus’s ideas are countercultural. In Jesus’s days, the society taught that if you forgave an offender or an offense up to seven times, you’d gone the extra mile and earned the right to pursue justice or vengeance. However, Jesus countered that and said that would not be the yardstick in His kingdom. Please, stay with me Steve and hear me out, because you need to work through this if you want to move on and not keep repeating the same cycle of hurt-revenge-murder-incarceration. I’d like to cover many aspects of this thorny issue.

Without sugarcoating, Jesus states the reality out there; it is plainly that you will be hurt. “Then He [Jesus] said to His disciples, ‘It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.’” (Lk. 17:1, 2). “Jesus said to His disciples: ‘Things that cause people to sin are bound to come...’” (v. 1; NIV).

You will be hurt in life. Some will do it accidentally, unintentionally, unconsciously, and inadvertently, never wanting to do any damage. Others will hurt you deliberately, intentionally, consciously, and purposely, knowing fully well what they are doing. Either way, the damage is done. An example of unintentional but nonetheless paralyzing hurt is what happened to Mephibosheth in the Old Testament. His nurse/caretaker, out of the kindness of her heart, wanted to keep the boy from harm but accidentally dropped him. As a result of the fall, Prince Mephibosheth was crippled for life (2 Samuel 4:4). Even today, some are broken or crippled in life, because those who pledged to take care of them have accidentally (or intentionally) dropped them. However, you don’t have to keep looking into your rear-view mirror. In 2 Samuel chapter 9, we read how God’s grace and mercy restored Mephibosheth and brought him to the king’s palace to dine at the same table with King David,

regardless of his crippled condition. You can count on the same restorative power and favor of God to work in your life and help compensate or ameliorate both inadvertent losses and losses deliberately inflicted on you by unkind individuals. Parenthetically, an interesting part of his story was that when Mephibosheth sat at the dining table with the king, his nobles, and princes, his problems—the crippled condition of his feet—were out of view under the table. Sitting and dining with princes and looking like one of them, his deformed feet were hidden under the table and only family members knew of his true condition. That's grace. Grace not only brings us to table to dine with the King, but it also covers our problems and prevents us from public ridicule.

Jesus nailed it down as a fact of life in this sinful world. There will not be a shortage of nasty people who do nasty things. People will do evil things, plan evil things, and design things that will promote sin, and invent new methods of doing harm and hurting people. We must deal with it as a fact. Yet, they are the problem, not you. They will pay for their actions. Both negative and positive actions have their corresponding consequences. We are all victims and culprits at the same time. Many of us have been hurt and abused and taken advantage of. We have been the victims of man's inhumanity against his fellowman. Yet, at the same time, many of us have also been culprits. We've been victimizers, the perpetrators of evil. Before they did it to us, we did it to them. The world's philosophy is "Do unto others what you don't want them to do to you and be proactive about it. That is, do it to them before they have the time to think about doing it to you." We have all done wicked things. We are sinners who have sinned against others and we also have been sinned against. If you've lived long enough you would know it is an evil world. You will always be hurt a second time if you don't readily forgive and let go any bitterness.

Be Watchful Without Paranoia

Jesus' counsel in Luke 17:3a, is "watch yourself," (NIV) or "take heed to yourselves." You cannot help people from being nasty, but you can protect

yourself from being hurt, violated, or molested. In other words, be careful. Don't walk around thinking everyone is evil and will do evil. Don't be schizophrenic. Be smart. If you have a wrong perspective of life you will always be on edge, afraid, or a bully. Don't be aggressive and don't be passive; be proactive and assertive. Don't be the doormat for people to walk upon and don't be the insecure aggressor bullying your way around. Commit your life and your way to God. "Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass," (Ps. 37:5). "Commit your works to the Lord, and your thoughts will be established," (Prov. 16:3). Commit, trust, and don't live in fear. "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them," (2 Kgs. 6:16). "He [Christ] who is in you is greater than he [the devil] who is in the world," (1 Jn. 4:4d). See also Psalms 91 and 121.

The pathway to peace in a human society, according to Jesus in Luke 17, verses 3b-4 is to forgive generously. Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him," (vv. 3, 4). You say how sincere is that repentance if he does the same thing again and again seven times in a row only to say, "I'm sorry," again and again without showing any change? That's confession from the mouth, not from the heart, and you are right to say that. I will answer you by asking you to be a little introspective. Isn't that like you and me in our attitude to God? We do the same thing, commit the same sin again and again in the course of a day, and turn to God again and again to forgive us, don't we? As a result God forgives us—beyond the seventh or seventy-seventh time! What if God were to question how genuine your confession is if you repeat the same act the next breath? Because we live in a sinful world, and because we have a sinful nature, and because the best of us still must deal with selfishness, we will always have frictions and conflicts in our relationships. Jesus says the way out, the way forward, is to learn to forgive and to do it quickly. We are not to gloss over sin. We are to care enough for the sake of the relationship and for the sake of the growth of the perpetrator, to confront and rebuke.

Read Proverbs 9:8c; 13:18; 15:5, 31; 24:25; 28:23; 29:15 on the necessity

and role of confronting, rebuking, or reproofing in a healthy relationship, and to maintain the health of the relationship. “Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you... He who rebukes a man will find more favor afterward than he who flatters with the tongue... The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother,” (Prov. 9:8c; 28:23; 29:15). Still, you need to have earned the right to confront, otherwise you will be seen as self-righteous and proud. Some people don’t know they are doing wrong until it is pointed out to them. The worst place to be is to do wrong or perform below expectation and for no one to care enough to challenge, rebuke or correct you. What if a parent or coach or mentor never confronts you or challenge when you perform below your ability? Will that be true love or a truly nurturing relationship? However, you need to have made deposits into a relationship before you can take the risk to confront, because people are defensive, even when they are illogical doing so.

Some Words of Jesus on Forgiveness

Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift, (Matt. 5:23, 24).

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses, (Matt. 6:14, 15).

And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses, (Mk. 11:25, 26).

Then Peter came to Him [Jesus] and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” (Matt. 18:21, 22)

Then He said to the disciples, “It is impossible that no offenses should

come. . . . Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.” (Lk. 17:1, 3, 4)

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that “by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.” And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church.” (Matt. 18:15–17)

From the above scriptures, the following imperatives become clear:

- Be proactive in seeking reconciliation when there’s a dispute in a relationship. Don’t wait for the other person—the offender or the offended—to make the first move. You do. Love is nourished by forgiveness; hate is kept alive through resentment. The divine law is *“forgive and you shall be forgiven”* (Lk. 6:37e).
- Approach the offender with the readiness to offer forgiveness, whether or not the person admits his faults and asks for your forgiveness. When you forgive, you free yourself from harboring any negative feelings toward the other person. Without forgiveness, the other person is the one remotely pulling your strings, because your actions and plans are conditioned on hurting or not be hurt by them.
- In your mind, juxtapose the magnitude of the offense and what the offender has done with the magnitude of your own sin against God and how completely and totally God has forgiven you at God’s own expense. God is not asking you to do what God has not done in a bigger fashion. God, your heavenly Father, is asking you to follow His example. When you do this, people will see you and say of you, “Like Father, like son.” What a beautiful testimony that is!
- Forgiving is a choice; it is a matter of the will. You are not to forgive on your feelings; you choose to forgive. You are not to forgive on

condition: if or when or unless. No one has to merit your forgiveness. You forgive as a gift, a grace gift, just as God has done for you.

- The Apostle Paul writes, “Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do” (Col. 3:13). We follow in Christ’s footsteps (1 Pt. 2:21) when we forgive as Christ forgave.
- Forgiving does not mean forgetting. Forgiving begins to approximate forgetting if you deliberately choose not to nurse the offense in your mind or relive it or continually play and replay it back in your mind. You need to train your mind to shift to positive and healthy thoughts about the person, (Phil. 4:8; Matt. 5:44).
- As the saying goes, “To err is human; to forgive is divine.” Jesus exemplified this when He forgave those who were insulting and assaulting Him and those who hammered nails on His legs and arms to affix Him to the cross. We notice the same godly response from Stephen in Acts 7. Forgiveness is the higher spiritual energy, on a higher positive plane. Not forgiving keeps you in the lower spiritual energy, a negative downward sloping level.

Jesus is saying that true Christianity is not simply about showing up in church and doing the right things in church. It is about love. When Jesus was asked the first and greatest commandment of the Law, Jesus distilled His answer into a two-in-one: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:34-40). These are the two sides of the coin in our faith. First, love God; that’s the vertical relationship. The second side is to love your fellow human beings; that’s the horizontal relationship. As Jesus and Scriptures make it plain, our faith is not portrayed by just our vertical relationship to God; it is also portrayed by a horizontal relationship with others. You cannot be right with God, vertically, when you are not right and not making efforts to be right, horizontally, with your neighbor whoever he or she may be.

The Apostle John was plain and bold when he wrote, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his

brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also,” (1 Jn. 4:20, 21).

Steve, have you considered doing this: going to your friend to confront him lovingly? For all you care he might not even be aware of the damage and hurt he’s caused you. This is an important step for you to take if you care enough about winning him back, and if you care enough about your friendship, you’ll want reconciliation.

Why Did Jesus Forgive Those Who Did Not Repent or Ask for Forgiveness?

The example of Jesus on the cross speaks volumes. Jesus forgave those who did not ask for His forgiveness, with no sign of repentance, and while they were still bent on destroying Him. Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do,” (Lk. 23:34). Why did Jesus pray this prayer? Why didn’t Jesus just say the prayer silently in His heart? Why did Jesus yell out the forgiveness than just silently pray it in His heart? These were the very first words Jesus uttered as He hung on the cross. Maybe Jesus wanted to show us that the ministry of forgiveness is not only for the offender to have peace and be off the hook but as well for the offended to have peace and be off the hook.

If you have bitterness against anyone, you will always think about them and be disturbed by the thoughts. The offender may not even remember you or the incident that’s agitating you. And here you are with your mind occupied with him while he has no thoughts about you or the offense. Who is in chains? You are the one in chains. Not forgiving has bound you to the person. He or she is hurting you again, and again, because you have given him or her that power over you. When Jesus prayed the Father to forgive those crucifying Him and added the caveat, “For they do not know what they do.” Was Jesus making excuses for them? Was He showing us that people who deliberately hurt others are ignorant of what they are doing to themselves and others? I want to believe that Jesus is teaching us that those who hurt others

are themselves to be pitied; they hurt others, because they are badly hurting and broken. Hurt people hurt people. Mark Twain said, “Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.”

We also note the example of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Following the footsteps of his Savior, Stephen forgave as his last gift and testament to his tormentors. He prayed, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin,” (Acts 7:60). Stephen did not rain down curses on those who were killing him; he prayed for them, for God’s mercy. That was authentic Christianity. Anybody can curse under that circumstance but not anybody can bless or pray for his persecutors. Jesus taught us: “love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,” (Matt. 5:44). In other words, love your abusers. Only God knows how often and how long that prayer by Stephen as he breathed his last kept on ringing in the mind of Saul, the young zealous Pharisee who was keeping watch over the garments of those stoning Stephen. It was a gift Stephen gave to those who did not deserve it. Saul of Tarsus, later Apostle Paul, witnessed an authentic Christian breathed his last breath. Under a hail of stones pelting him, Stephen died with a glow on his face and love in his heart.

As expected, undertakers hear soul-searing laments and words of regrets from families and friends of the deceased. There’s a type of regret they hear that make undertakers shake their heads. It is agony over unexpressed love and forgiveness that’s been granted in their hearts but that they failed to communicate, and now it’s too late. They hear friend and family of the departed saying with sobs and deep pains in their heart, “I wish I had called to let her know I no longer hold any grudge against her, but I didn’t. Now she’s on the other side thinking I am still mad at her.” “I had the opportunity to let him know I have forgiven him and moved on, but I missed that; now he will never know.” “I wish I had told him that I have put his offense behind me and we could be friends again.” They voice such confession by a deceased’s casket hoping desperately that the dead could read their thoughts.

It is equally true with the dying. Many take their last breath with such regrets too. If they could have total control of the last hour of their lives their

deathbed parting activities would have included confessions to many friends and family members. Seizing one last chance to make peace with themselves and others, some might make phone calls, some might dictate or write notes or record a voice message to many telling them they were forgiven long ago. However, the hour of death being out of their control, they pass on deeply regretting that although they had forgiven them, they failed to communicate that to them, but not Jesus or Stephen, and it shouldn't be you. So, if you've turned a new page, don't keep it to yourself. Communicate your forgiveness. If they ask why you would or could, tell them your testimony how you met Jesus who freely forgave you all your sins. If they say they don't need your forgiveness, tell them it's been given and close the door to that part of your life and move on in peace.

Viewed from another angle, forgiveness is not necessarily for the benefit of the offender, but to regain your own independence. You forgive for your own emotional health. It has been said, "Bitterness or harboring an unforgiving spirit is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die," (Nelson Mandela). Who's having sleepless nights or losing appetite when you harbor bitterness, resentment, and an unforgiving spirit? Who's walking around with clenched teeth? Who is on the borderline of insanity and mental health? For your sanity, let go and let God. God knows how best to right the wrongs. God can handle your circumstances much better than you can. God unequivocally promised in both the Old Testament and New Testament, saying, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord," (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30).

The so-called law of retaliation, "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise," (Exo. 21:23, 24; see also Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21), when read in its context, was meant to limit the punishment to fit the crime. It represents a statement of principle that the penalty is to fit the crime, not exceed it. An actual eye or tooth was not to be required and there's no evidence in the Old Testament that such a penalty was ever exacted. A similar law of retaliation is found in the Code of Hammurabi and that also has no evidence that it was

literally applied. Christ objected to an extremist use of this judicial principle to excuse private vengeance. By invoking the law of love, Jesus corrected the popular misunderstanding of the law of retaliation. Strange as it may seem, Jesus says, “Go the extra mile.” Jesus, as He did with other OT injunctions in the Sermon on the Mount, here also directed His audience to the intent and spirit of the Mosaic law of tooth for tooth:

38You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. 41And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. 42Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away (Matt. 5:38-42).

At least thrice in the Holy Writ, it is written, “Repay no one evil for evil... Beloved, do not avenge yourselves... for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.” The apostle Peter reminds us the pattern Jesus left for us is to follow, “in His steps.” (1 Pet. 2:21d). We follow in His steps, “As He forgave us...” so do we to others. How do we forgive? The answer is “as God in Christ has forgiven us.” How was that? Freely. At God’s own expense. Without strings attached. How do we forgive like God? We may forgive but unlike God we may not forget. But, forgiving gradually begins to approximate forgetting if we do the following:

1. Stop rehearsing the pain or hurt; stop playing the tape repeatedly in your mind
2. Stop telling and retelling the story; stop rehearsing the episode and seeking pity/sympathy from others
3. Stop nursing the pain; stop meditating on it or having a pity party; when God forgives, He also forgets (Heb. 10:17).

Offenses Are to Be Recognized and Dealt With, not Buried or Glossed Over

Is there anyone who has NEVER done or said something wrong or hurtful to his or her parent or siblings, or caregiver or spouse? No one! Yet, they chose to forgive you. What if they will not forgive you; what if they forever keep holding it up to you and nursing the wound, recounting the pain and reminding you of your wrongdoing every time? There'll be no marriage or family. Forgiving and being forgiven is the reason why we have families, neighborhoods, and society and even a local church. Refusing to forgive, for whatever reasons, opens the door to Satan, (2 Cor. 2:10, 11). Society cannot go on without forgiveness. "An eye for an eye will leave everyone blind," said Martin Luther King Jr. Forgiving one another is the only way we can begin anew and renew broken relationships. Forgiveness brings healing and restoration to both the offended and offender. There'll be no family, no church and no neighborhood or society unless we practice forgiveness. The penal system is based on seeking justice. You can serve your term in jail for a crime and, as they say, pay your debt to society, and yet not forgive or be forgiven for what you've served a term. So, where's justice?

Sociology is the study of human society. Due to human nature, offences will come in our human interactions. If we want to live together as a society, we must learn to let go and forgive offenses. To forgive is to let go, to release. We will always hurt and offend one another (Matthew 18:7-20). The Bible gives us a method to work out our reconciliation in Matthew 18:15-20. It is to first confront the person with the problem. The worst place to be is to do wrong, and no one cares to point it out. Confrontation is risky and we try to avoid it. If, however, you are interested in investing in a person or in a relationship with the person, you confront so you may have no bitterness, malice or hatred and can work for understanding and restored communication. If you don't care about a relationship, then you ignore offenses, because "it's not worth it" or "he or she is not worth it; not worth the effort; not worth your time." You don't challenge, because you don't care or couldn't care less. Hurt pains only where there's love or commitment. Without commitment

the offense does not deeply hurt.

Human forgiveness is different from divine forgiveness. In human forgiveness we withhold penalty, we show mercy, we demand no punishment or payment of any kind for the wrongdoing. But in divine forgiveness someone else pays the penalty; the sin is judged, punished and paid for (or atoned for) by a willing scapegoat. In heaven's diary, sin is not winked at or glossed over, because sin cannot be atoned for unless punished and paid for; "for the wages of sin is death."

Forgiving and reconciling does not make you a fool. After forgiveness has been granted for an offense, you may need to redefine the measure of trust with the person, or readjust boundaries or reestablish new boundaries or set up new measures or levels of expectation so you may not be unduly hurt in the future. Protect yourself against being unnecessarily taken advantage of because you are a Christian. It is important to note that "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," (Matt. 5:12) is the only portion of the Lord's Prayer that the Lord expatiated upon in the immediate verses following the Lord's Prayer, verses 14 and 15. Forgiving others is that important to Jesus. Which also raises the question: Is our being forgiven by God dependent on our forgiving others?

14For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Is Our Being Forgiven by God Dependent on Our Forgiving Others?

DAY 6

A troubled pastor in my childhood (village) church told me he could not say some portions of the Lord's Prayer as Jesus taught it. Jesus taught us to say, "Forgive us our trespasses [or sins], as we forgive those who trespass [or sin] against us." He said he had two problems with that. First, that would sound like he was cursing himself out of God's kingdom if God forgiving his sins was dependent on his ability to forgive others and to the degree of such forgiveness. Second, his doom would be self-made, because his own prayer

would forever exclude him from God's forgiveness if God were to forgive him to the same measure and level, he forgave others. Rather, this was how he was comfortable to pray, "Forgive us our sins, so that we may forgive those who sin against us." I know he'd been badly hurt by the man he had trusted as sponsor or benefactor. He sang for me and taught me a song he had composed in the vernacular as he wrestled to "let go and let God."

To be fair to this pastor, let me give you some details. He was the pastor of a village church that served as the place of worship for many surrounding villages. The headmaster of the only public elementary school that served many neighboring villages was instrumental in inviting him to pastor the church. By and large, the headmaster, though not the head deacon, was the most prominent leader in the village church. As soon as the vicarage was completed, the headmaster turned against him. The pastor's residence built beside the church was the most spacious and beautiful house with modern amenities in the village. From that time on the headmaster, fueled by greed or envy, this authoritarian church leader, turned on him and made the pastor's life a living hell until he was forced out. The headmaster then moved into the vicarage pending the time the church would call the next pastor, which never happened. He lived there (and preached on Sundays too!) till he died. This headmaster had mastered a way of working around and circumventing the system through lobbying, politicking and offering bribes, which was why he had not been transferred but remained as the headmaster of the public school for about twenty years or more. He had grossly and notoriously abused his influential position at many levels, including embezzling church funds. He also married one of his former pupils—a girl much younger than his children. Apparently, this aggrieved pastor struggled with forgiving his former mentor. He was one of those who refrained themselves from openly displaying their extreme happiness and sense of vindication when they learned of the headmaster's sudden demise. When he died, while others were modest and suppressed their feelings, his neglected children couldn't hide their disdain.

The academic or theologian in me sees a different problem with this portion of the prayer. Not the kind of problem this pastor had but a theologically

thorny issue for me nonetheless. Somehow, this portion of the Lord's Prayer sounds almost antithetical to the rest of the New Testament. It sounds like the Old Testament language of works: if you do this then God will do that; if you forgive others, then God will forgive you as well. Isn't that Old Testament works-based theology? Where is grace in that context? The law requires you to do something; it is based on performance. Yet, grace gives you what you cannot do for yourself. Grace asks you to believe and receive. Which leads me to ask, "Are we to work for (as in do, or perform, something towards) our forgiveness?" "Rather, is our forgiveness dependent or predicated on how good and forgiving we are?" In other words, are we saying that God forgiving us is based on our efforts at forgiving others first? To complicate matters, when Peter asks Jesus about how often to forgive, Jesus in Matthew 18 gives the parable of the unforgiving servant whose forgiveness was withdrawn, reversed, or cancelled, because he had refused to forgive a fellow man. There's no way that you read this parable of the unforgiving servant and not come to conclusions similar to what other religions of the world teach. For example, in Islam, two of some of the sayings (hadith) of Mohammed on mercy go this way:

"God has no mercy on one who has no mercy for others;" and "The merciful are shown mercy by the All-Merciful. Show mercy to those on earth, and God will show mercy to you." (Mohammed)

I can understand the implications of such pronouncements from other religions but CHRISTIANITY? Whatever happens to "by grace through faith... not of works, lest any man should boast," (Eph. 2:8, 9)? I wrestled with questions such as, 1) What if being truly forgiven is dependent on forgiving others as the passages seem to suggest? I definitely won't take my chances with an unforgiving spirit. 2) Let's say Matthew 6:12 is not for sinners seeking salvation but for those already forgiven, saved and needing forgiveness for their failings; do we then get saved by grace only to be sanctified by works? Do we really have to forgive to be forgiven? From scriptures and the spirit of the New Testament, I found the answer boils down to this: Grace brings responsibility or obligation and God's grace precedes any thought of grace from us. We love God, because He first loved us, (1 Jn. 4:19). We give freely,

because we have first received freely, (Matt. 10:8). I can best digest it in this statement: You won't sit (or cannot sit) with Father-God at the dinner table if you are unwilling to sit around the table with God's other children and eat dinner with God and them. It is a family thing and God's family is not dysfunctional. See 1 John 3:10-18; 4:7-21. "He who loves God must love his brother also," (1 Jn. 4:21). Without forgiveness, human society would be a bitter hell, literally.

Grace brings responsibility or obligation. If you've been forgiven, you are under obligation to forgive others; otherwise, you'll be trifling with God's sacrifice for your sin. You prove you don't deserve forgiveness when you refuse to forgive others. Grace is free but not cheap. It cost Jesus His life and it obliges us to extend grace to others. See Matthew 18:7, 21-35; Luke 6:37. If it ever crosses your mind how much you have been forgiven or what it cost for you to be forgiven, you will not think twice before you forgive others. Grace is free, but once you embrace grace you are obligated to be gracious; otherwise you forfeit your grace. Being gracious is the proof of having received God's grace. Jesus says, "Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven," (Lk. 6:37). [Per Greek syntax, "Judge not constantly, and you will not be judged constantly."]

When Jesus was asked to summarize the Law, He put forth two: Love God and love your fellow men, Matthew 21:34-40. In the Beatitudes, Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy." What then happens to one who is deficient in mercy on the bases of how the world has treated him or her? In His closing discourse before Jesus returned to heaven, He gave His disciples a new commandment, "by this shall all know that you are my disciples, if you have love [radical love] for one another." Love forgives totally. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 that love keeps no record of wrongdoing; in other words, love is forgiving. In other epistles like Ephesians, Paul says we should forgive just as we have been forgiven. How have you and I been forgiven? Without conditions! Totally! Dare I say, unreasonably, too? God's forgiveness is not based on feelings but on His promise—1 John 1:9. God

gives us His Word: “If you confess, I will forgive.” We forgive in like manner. I give my word.

John, in 1 John, repeats that to hate or not to love another is a proof of not knowing Christ. John even says you have no justification to say that you are right or at peace with God if you are not right or actively pursuing peace with your neighbor. 1 John 3:10-15; 4:7-21. Is there someone who needs your forgiveness today? Love forgives unreasonably!

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:21–35)

Jesus is the Master storyteller. He often uses hyperboles to illustrate His point. To answer Peter’s question, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (Matt. 18:21), Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:22). The point is not to keep count at all but to be willing always to forgive. Jesus then illustrates His point with the parable of two debtors to two creditors. One owes hundred denarii to one creditor; the other owes ten thousand talents to another creditor. A denarius was one day’s wage for a laborer. A talent was worth about six thousand denarii. Ten thousand talents would be worth sixty million days’ wages, a sum that would be impossible to repay. Some have computed ten thousand talents to be equivalent to annual revenue of the British Empire! We are talking about a debt of 60,000,000 denarii versus 100 denarii. Or a ratio of 1:600,000! Talk about hyperbole!

As you may expect, this creditor could never pay such a huge debt with compounded interest even in a thousand lifetimes. He begged for mercy, and he was forgiven—forgiven of all that huge debt. In Bible times, the lender has some options to recoup his money. He could enslave the debtor and his family to work for him; he could sell the debtor and his family as slaves, or he could imprison the debtor and his family. He could do any or all these so the debtor or his family would be forced to sell off their family land or the family members would be forced to find some other ways to pool resources together to deliver him from the creditor. Proverbs 22:7 says, “The rich rules over the poor, And the borrower is servant to the lender.” So, the law was on the side

of the rich lender, but he chose to let go and lose him of the burden.

It just happens that the same man who was forgiven of his huge debt is lender to another who owes him the 100 denarii. He asks for his money, but the guy didn't have the means to settle his debt. He begged for mercy, almost using the same words this fellow had earlier used to beg for mercy. What do you expect? You would think he would hear the echo of his own words begging for mercy and be equally forgiving and release the debtor. Unfortunately, that's not what he did. He demanded justice, and the law was on his side. He said to the man, "What is it going to be: my money or you go to jail?" The man could not cough up the money, so he was jailed. Word then got back to the big lender who had forgiven this huge debt. He reversed his judgment. He also, in return, said to the man, "I forgave you that huge sum, because you couldn't pay and begged for mercy. Since you wouldn't forgive your fellowman who owed you that paltry sum, I am also demanding, 'what's it going to be: my money or you go to jail?'" Well, as you know, the big lender hadn't done anything wrong, and the law was on the lender's side. The man ended up in jail, because he could not pay the debt. The story is in Matthew 18:21–35. You should get a Bible and read it in Jesus' words.

It's hard for me to get this man's case out of my mind. I've read it in many translations and read many commentaries explaining its equivalence today. Here is another pictorial representation of this scenario. Maybe you'll see why it's stuck in my head. Some have estimated that a talent is worth twenty years' wage for a laborer. The servant owes ten thousand talents. That is an equivalent of two hundred thousand years' worth of labor. Or $200,000 \times 365 = 73,000,000$ days' worth of labor. A denarius is a laborer's daily wage. The other servant owes one hundred denarii, or equivalence of one hundred days' wages. Do the math: a ratio of 100 to 73,000,000 or 1:730,000. One owes an amount that cannot be repaid in a million lifetimes; the other owes what may be repaid within a year.

I used to think of this as hyperbole, but what if Jesus is saying to us that this is the unimaginable and inconceivable ratio compared to what others owe us and what we owe God? A ratio of 1:730,000 is mind-boggling! Somebody

forgives you a debt of \$730,000, and you wouldn't forgive another a debt of \$1? I wish I could get into this servant's head and know his thoughts. Did he think he deserved his forgiveness and the fellow servant didn't deserve to be forgiven? Did he think his master was a fool to have forgiven him instead of being tough on him? Was he instead, desperately in need of the one hundred denarii to buy liquor to celebrate his forgiveness?

Here is the lesson: God is that big lender to whom we all owe a debt of sin that we cannot pay. Yet, God forgives us, because Jesus has paid the debt. Our fellow human beings are the debtors who owe us. Whatever the hurt, whatever the offense, and whatever sum of money is owed pales in comparison to what we owed God and have been forgiven by God. That is not to minimize or belittle the pains and agonies we suffer when we are wronged. God equally suffers pain because of the strained relationship on account of our sins. Justice and the law are on God's side to exact from us the full punishment for our sins, but God chooses mercy and forgiveness, not justice and legal details. We are commanded to do the same: "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). Is that too much to ask for? Steve, I don't think so.

Dr. John M. Perkins²⁴, reflecting on this parable in his book, *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love*, linked forgiveness to a spirit of gratitude; a person choosing to forgive others out of gratitude for the immensity of God's forgiveness of his own debts. Dr. Perkins writes, "To forgive is to make a decision to cancel a debt that someone owed you and not to hold it against your offender. There is no forgiveness without a debt. When we realize the enormity of our own debt it makes forgiveness possible. So, in this sense forgiveness is closely connected to gratitude. If our hearts overflow with gratitude for all that the Lord has done for us, all that He did to secure our salvation, all that He continues to do to keep us, then forgiveness will be easier. The person who doesn't have anything to be grateful for is an angry, vengeful person" (p. 102).

24. *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love*, by Dr. John M. Perkins; Moody Publishers, Chicago; © 2018

Why Forgive and How to Forgive

I know it is tough to be taken advantage of and suffer needless hurt, but when it comes to dealing with such an issue as “to forgive or not forgive,” I want to remind you of three things by answering the question of why and how:

1. First, why do we forgive or why should we forgive? The answer is we forgive, because grace obligates us to. From the story of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21–35, whose forgiveness was withdrawn or cancelled, because he would not forgive another, we learn that grace brings obligation or responsibility to be gracious. Anyone who has received the grace of forgiveness and mercy is obligated to grant the same to others. You prove you don't deserve forgiveness when you refuse to forgive others. Grace is free, but once you embrace grace you are obligated to be gracious; otherwise, you forfeit your grace. If you cannot or will not forgive, it is a sign that you really have not been forgiven. Besides, you will never have the full assurance of being forgiven by God if you have not fully forgiven your fellow human beings who have sinned against you. As Dr. Perkins put it, we forgive from an overflow of gratitude for our forgiveness. “The person who doesn't have anything to be grateful for is an angry, vengeful person,” (Dr. Perkins).
2. Second, how do we forgive? The answer is we forgive as our Christian duty. What is a duty? Duty is an assignment you are required to perform, a responsibility you discharge, a moral or legal obligation, in this case, a spiritual obligation. Jesus tells a parable in Luke 17:1–10 to remind us that we are to forgive others as our Christian duty. Does anybody say, “Thank you,” or is anybody obligated or expected to say “Thank you” at the end of the day after performing your duty? Does the IRS send you a “thank you” note for fulfilling your civic duty by paying your tax in full and on time? Why do people muster courage every day or psych up themselves against the dictates of their flesh to report for work even when they don't feel like it? Duty! A sense of duty! Most people don't go to work,

because they feel like it; they go, because it is their duty and others are depending on them. Have you heard of a school bus driver or the classroom teacher who does not show up for work, because he is not in the mood for work that day? After an exhaustive eight hours on the job, most mothers don't cook for their family, because they feel like it; they drag themselves to the kitchen, because they have a sense of duty to feed their family. That's the same way we forgive: It is our Christian duty. It does not depend on how we feel but how we obey God. When the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith so they could forgive as He wanted them to, this is how the conversation went and how Jesus responded:

Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."

And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant, because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things [when you have forgiven again and again] which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'" (Lk. 17:3–10; insert mine)

In other words, there's nothing to boast or brag about how much or how greatly we have forgiven an offender; it is just our Christian duty to do so.

3. Third and last, again, how do we forgive? The answer is, we forgive

as Christ has forgiven us. How did Christ forgive us? Unconditionally, Totally, Freely, at God's own expense, without strings attached, volitionally, based on His will and not based on His feelings or emotions. Based on God's nature, God's love was simultaneously volitional and emotional, and so was our acceptance and His forgiveness of our sins. We read Paul's admonition in the Bible: Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, **forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.** (Eph. 4:31, 32. Emphasis mine).

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and **forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.** (Col. 3:12, 13. Emphasis, mine).

Beginning in Ephesians 4:22-24, the Apostle Paul wrote, "that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness" (emphasis mine). Unfortunately, many Christians are known for the "put off" and not for any Christian "put on." Many Christians are defined by what they don't do, as if the faith is a "don't" affair. They don't smoke cigarette, they don't abuse alcohol, they don't gamble, they don't use cuss words, and that's all—a bunch of don'ts. Yet, what are they known for? Paul gave instructions not only on what to put off (the don'ts) concerning our former carnal life but also what to put on, (the dos)—what to be known for, in the light of our new life. We are not just a religion of DON'TS. Our Christian faith is not to be defined by, "I don't do this; and I don't do that." We are to be known for what we do; what we put on. One thing we should be known for is that we forgive as God in Christ forgave us.

Is Reconciliation Always Possible?

The goal of forgiveness is reconciliation. The goal is finally to put the past and offenses of the past behind us and move into the future forging a new or restored mutually nurturing relationship. God did not forgive us and then kept us at arm's length. God forgives, embraces and starts us off on an entirely clean plate. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation, Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God," (2 Cor. 5:18-20). To the Ephesians he wrote, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ," (Eph. 2:13).

In human forgiveness, two wills, two individuals are in relationship. Unfortunately, not many want to be in relationship, and this cannot be forced. Some people are highly tense, combative individuals and don't pursue peace as a priority in their approach to life. They seem to thrive on differences, arguments, and conflicts in every arena. Sounds like the Psalmist who lamented, "I love them, but they try to destroy me with accusations even as I am praying for them! They repay evil for good, and hatred for my love... I search for peace; but when I speak of peace, they want war!" (Psa. 109:4, 5; 120:7; NLT). We strive to love others the same way God loves us—sacrificially, unconditionally, and selflessly. We also strive to forgive them the same way God forgives us—completely, totally, and unconditionally. In His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), Jesus said,

43You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, 45that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46For if you love those who love you, what reward have

you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? 48Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

We can repent and regret, but we cannot undo what's been done and its rippling effect or consequences. Offenses, sin, or disobedience always carry some consequences. God's forgiveness does not do away with the consequences of sin and disobedience. In some cases, God's grace and mercy may mediate or lessen the full force of the consequences, but it is hardly wished away. The fact that we suffer the consequences of our actions and misdeeds does not suggest that God is punishing us for our sins. They are not payment for sin but the rippling effects of our action. Sin is not just a personal act; it is a social act. A network of people is directly or indirectly affected by every act of sin and it sets off a domino or rippling effect far beyond the corner where the act took place. In science, we learn that for every action, there is a reaction, a consequent effect. Our actions generate energy that initiates and sets things in motion. Everything we do is like a seed we plant; and once planted, the seed has a life of its own. You cannot deny or blame a seed you accidentally bury in the soil from sprouting.

For example, if a married person cheats on his or her spouse and later repents, God will forgive but he or she will still have to face the consequences, which may include hard work to repair and restore trust back into the marriage and if pregnancy results, that further complicates the situation. If a young person is promiscuous and later repents, God will forgive but if he/she has caught any sexually transmitted disease such as venereal disease or even the HIV virus in the process, those are the repercussions of the sin, but they do not diminish or remove God's forgiveness. If a person is guilty of vehicular manslaughter as a result of DWI or DUI and he repents and never touches alcohol or drugs thereafter, God will forgive and wipe it off His slate but he still has to deal with the social consequences of taking another life; he has to answer to the State for his misdeed.

An example from the Bible is King David in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. King

David committed adultery with the wife of one of his devoted soldiers and to cover it up, arranged the murder of the husband. There was no provision in the Old Testament Levitical order to offer sacrifice for adultery or murder to obtain forgiveness. The guilty person was to be publicly executed. Nonetheless, God forgave David; he did not have to die. Psalm 51 is one of his recorded prayers of confession and repentance to God. David was forgiven, but his moral lapse as the leader had set off a chain of events that damaged his reputation. Sin is not only personal or spiritual; it is also social, and it destabilizes the social order, because it affects our human relationships. David, as God's representative, could not sin with impunity; things were never the same as before for David's family and kingdom.

Forgiveness is an intentional and deliberate act of the will. To forgive means to be determined not to relate to, or deal with, the person through the lens of the offence. But it also means to redefine the relationship, if it calls for it. To do otherwise will be reckless. This means that reconciliation to the prior state of the relationship might no longer be possible or even advisable, in some cases. For example, if money has been an issue in a friendship, redefining the relationship after forgiveness may suggest that I will set new boundaries and will no longer deal with the friend in money matters as before, until a true change is proven. But I must be willing to incrementally relax and trust again in a way corresponding to the change in attitude. This is the only way I will not be playing the fool and be easily taken advantage of in the relationship. Forgiveness is mandatory but it does not automatically mean reconciliation. In Romans 12:18, the Apostle wrote, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men." "Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone," (NLT).

Steve, as a parting word, I'd like to remind you that we are all flawed, and from time to time we stand in need of mercy and forgiveness from God and from our fellow human beings. Next time the mistake, misdeed or misstep may come from you and you will need others to embrace you, forgive you, and give you a fresh start. Certainly, you will not want them to label you, define you, castigate and write you off because of one single mistake. You

want them to be magnanimous and merciful. Then, do the same unto them. That's the Golden Rule: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets," (Matt. 7:12). Someday, something in or out of character may put you on the other side, humbled or even humiliated, with your head bowed, needing people to embrace you regardless, to voice their unconditional forgiveness and offer you another chance, the gift of a fresh start. We forgive because by so doing we are sowing the seed for our own forgiveness. "For whatever a man sows, that he will also reap," (Gal. 6:7c). "Give, and it will be given unto you; good measure, pressed down... and running over... For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you," (Luke 6:38). Forgive because, by and large, your own forgiveness may be predicated on your forgiving others for "blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy... But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses," (Matt. 5:7; 6:15).

The litmus test that true forgiveness has taken place and there's no resentment or bitterness even when reconciliation is not (or can no longer be) in the picture is this: 1) If the person's name comes up in a discussion and your heart races or skips a beat, do you whisper a prayer for him in your heart or do you tighten your jaw and wish evil on him; and 2) If this person is dying and needs your blood type or kidney to survive, would you be willing to donate your blood or organ to save his life? If you cannot answer these two questions with an emphatic Yes, it most likely suggests that you are still nursing the hurt.

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses. (Matt. 6:14, 15; Mk. 11:25, 26)

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION/ MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 7

1. What is forgiveness? What is reconciliation? Is forgiveness the same as reconciliation? (See 2 Cor. 5:19.) Is reconciliation as mandatory as forgiveness is? (Use a dictionary if you have to).
2. When I say, “I forgive you,” what does it mean to me? And what does it (or what should it) mean to you?
3. When God says, “I forgive you,” what does it mean to God? And what does it mean to you? (See Hebrew 8:12.)
4. How did God forgive us? Or how did God in Christ forgive us?
5. Do we ever earn, or merit being forgiven by God or by someone else we offend? Does someone who offends you have to earn or merit your forgiveness? Or is forgiving others who offend us a gift and grace we extend to them? Discuss.
6. How do you know that you have been forgiven? How do you know that you have truly forgiven someone? (See 1 John 1:9.)
7. If we, as human beings, cannot “forgive and forget,” what practices, mind-sets, and habits can make our forgiving begin to approximate forgetting completely?
8. How is not forgiving a person makes you lose your freedom to that person? Has it been your experience that, almost like using a remote control, your feelings and actions are conditioned by merely thinking of that person who once hurt you, remembering him or his actions, just hearing his name mentioned, or, worse, by accidentally encountering that person? If yes, kindly relate your story. Who is in bondage in that context—the offender or the offended? What needs to change to bring true freedom?
9. A preacher says, “The fruit of the Holy Spirit [Gal. 5:22, 23] cannot grow until the roots of bitterness [Heb. 12:14, 15] have been uprooted from the heart.” Comment.
10. It has been said, “Bitterness or harboring unforgiving spirit is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die” (Nelson

- Mandela). Explain why you agree or disagree.
11. “If you do not forgive, you are allowing yourself to be hurt a second time or every time.” Agree or disagree. Explain.
 12. Why was the forgiveness of a servant in Jesus’s story cancelled? Was it fair for the Master to take back what he had given freely? And must the Master’s action be based on the meanness of one of his servants? Is it still grace if “grace brings obligation”? Discuss.
 13. How does forgiving others as a sense of our Christian duty (Luke 17:6–10) take the responsibility off the offender, whether he is genuinely repentant or not, and places it on the offended?
 14. The ratio of 100 denarius to 10 talents is 1:173,000. I used to refer to it as hyperbole or that Jesus exaggerated for emphasis. But now I want to believe that Jesus might actually be saying that compared to what we are asked to forgive and what we’ve been forgiven, the ratio is unthinkable—1:173,000. Mind-boggling. How does that affect your understanding of the need to forgive others?
 15. The author states, “Justice and the law are on God’s side to exact from us the full punishment for our sins, but God chooses mercy and forgiveness, not justice and legal details. We are commanded to do the same, ‘And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you’ [Eph. 4:32]. Is that too much to ask for?” Discuss what the paragraph means and explain your answer.
 16. About understanding forgiveness, the chaplain writes, “It is our Christian duty. It does not depend on how we feel but how we obey God.” Is it fair to expect me to forgive while I am still hurting and feeling the pain? Discuss.
 17. Trust has been broken, and there’s a scar in the relationship because of the offense, but I have forgiven an offender. How soon do I, or can I, reestablish trust? Should I put some boundaries or conditions to be met? What do I look for to restore or mend the relationship? Does it mean I am not extending grace if, going forward, I put

- some demands or expectations on the relationship? And how do I prevent or protect myself from being hurt again or taken advantage of? Discuss the process of forgiveness and reconciliation.
18. What are the two things the author suggested as litmus test that true forgiveness has taken place even when full reconciliation is not possible/advisable? Why, or why not, do you consider these as essential?
19. Unpack the Mark Twain saying, “Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.” From this quote, explain why forgiveness has to be 1) a gift rather than something earned, 2) promptly discharged even without (or before) the aggressor’s awareness or desire for it, and 3) that’s dependent on the nature and inner constitution of the aggrieved alone. Pay attention to these six key words in this saying are: 1) forgiveness [a choice action], 2) fragrance [a response unrelated to the injury inflicted], 3) violet [the aggrieved, the object under attack, the innocent bystander], 4) sheds [or bleeds out], 5) heel [aggressor’s callousness], and 6) crushed [intentional or unintentional damage, irreparable destruction].
20. EXTRA CREDIT: Read 2 Samuel chapters 13 to 15. a) How did king David handle forgiveness? b) Was there full reconciliation between father and son even after the son returned from exile? c) Many believe king David, the successful war general and Psalmist whom history noted as “the man after God’s heart,” failed as a father on many levels. Explain why you agree or disagree from these 3 chapters. d) Could king David’s parental style have led to, or preconditioned, his rebellion in chapter 15? Discuss. e) If you could advise David on the events in these 3 chapter, what would you advice David to do, not to do, or to do differently at each stage regarding each episode?

Theme: Proving the Genuineness of Your Faith Before the World

Blackmon (not his name) was my inmate clerk. He was serving eight years for burglary. He had been the chaplain's clerk in his former jail before he was transferred to our facility. Apparently, now a Christian, and nearly completing his term, asked, "Rev., no matter what we do and how much we have changed and been transformed, the COs [meaning correction officers] don't give us a chance. Even when they know we don't get tickets for misbehavior; they still don't believe we have changed. They still see us as criminals. Why is that so? We go through the same thing with our family, trying to win back their trust. Rev., that can be very discouraging from even ever trying to do better, because, no matter what you do, you can't do enough to please them. They are just waiting for your downfall to prove their point. Why can't they see the change in us?"

Preamble

That was the question of my hardworking, trusted clerk. I felt sad, because I believed he had learned his lessons and was doing his best to stay out of jail. He is also enrolled in the college program and taking some college-level courses. I was not the only one who had this faith in him. Even the Catholic chaplain, who was more pragmatic and who I often considered pessimistic, also thought Blackmon had changed, because he too worked closely with him. As fate would have it, about a month after Blackmon posed this question, I had to fire him for stealing cards. The eagle-eyed chapel CO frisked him, something he rarely did to our clerks, as he was about to exit the ministerial building. He was in the company of Danny (not his name), our talented inmate-musician-choir leader whom every CO distrusted and held in suspi-

cion. (That was why they were frisked.)

Danny had been a worship leader since his preteen. He had come to me that day for counseling. Yet, it was difficult to help him, because he had all the right answers to any question on any subject or topic, and he could even preempt your next question. He had also seen the ins and outs of different churches and their ministers that he played for, for his “cut,” as he likes to refer to his check at the end of the deal. He would tell you that many big-name pulpiteers were there for the show and money. On the keyboard, working in concert with the preacher, Danny regaled how he could fire up the preacher, rescue a limping sermon and stir up the audience into frenzy... all through the magic of his fingers on the keyboard. Many preachers hired him for this. To Danny, it’s all a performance. For him, its mission accomplished when the service ended with the keyboard, the preacher and the congregation all roused to a fever pitch crescendo. As soon as he got his check, he hurried to the next church performance. Sometimes he did two or three gigs on a Sunday. Danny is a young man you would want for a nephew, because he is smart and multitalented, but he’s also that nephew you cannot vouch for or defend on whatever anyone charges that he did. You want to believe him, but you have some doubts when he tells you he’s not “coming back to jail.”

Apart from his attitude, Danny had spent his time well in jail. He’s a ferocious reader.²⁵ He claimed to have read the whole Bible, from cover to cover, in the few lonely weeks he spent in a county jail before his transfer to our jail. Whenever they accused him of stealing books (from my library or the Protestant library), I always made a joke of it. I’d say, “Black people don’t steal books, and if I find one who does because he wants to read it, he can have the book.” So, I’d let it go. He knew more book titles in my library than I do, and many disappeared mysteriously. Danny learned Spanish, Greek, and Hebrew;

25. In the first three years of my chaplaincy we had inmates who loved to read. For that reason, we had a well-stocked Protestant library, manned by two inmate-librarians. The then facility librarian helped us to set it up. Our librarians would wheel out the carts during Sunday worship service and Monday Bible study for inmates to browse and borrow books. The inmate population has changed with regards to reading. For the past three years or more the Protestant library hasn’t featured as one of our ministries.

and he was a registered student in the distance learning, off-campus programs in more than two seminaries or Bible colleges. He's a walking concordance and encyclopedia at the same time. After obtaining his GED in jail, he also took some college courses in the college program.

A GED was the minimum to be a chaplain's clerk. Soon after he obtained his GED, he was briefly employed as my clerk, because I thought I might probably help him if I had him hanging around me. I had to let him go because everybody—chaplains, other chaplain's clerks, and COs—were uncomfortable and always having something new to complain about him. As far as he was concerned, they were the problems, the liars, and the ones who had issues. His main problem was his attitude and this aura of insincerity about him whenever he showed up that made your spirit alert you lest you were sucked in by his innocent looks and wonderful attributes. A single mom raised Danny and his kid brother. Their mom was caught up in her pathological condition and was dealing with many issues at the same time which prevented her from being able to provide for her boys. Danny, from childhood, assumed the role of fending for himself and his brother and shoplifting in grocery stores was the means. I don't recall how much his father was part of his childhood, but when he was incarcerated his father and grand mom were the family members who visited him.

I knew it was going to be a waste of time, but I couldn't say no when Danny said he would like to come for counseling as his release date was in a matter of weeks. That was what brought him into my office and into contact with my clerk; otherwise, he wouldn't have been there that afternoon. It was the first counseling session of the three sessions that I said I would work with him, and I was glad the incident terminated the prospects of other sessions. The CO banned him from ever coming near the chapel. Danny was a one-man band who could make anything—I mean anything—happen on the electronic keyboard. He was born into a family of professional church musicians, and the keyboard was his first and probably the only toy he ever had. Because he was too bigheaded, always posing like a professor even though he got his GED (high school equivalency) in jail, and pretending to work for

me even though he wasn't my clerk anymore, and couldn't be trusted, I didn't really project him as our music or worship leader and at the same time I did not want to rob him of the privilege of using his gift among us. He was a few days before his twenty-third birthday when he was granted a conditional release from prison to parole. After he left, God sent me (and I did not pray for this) a pianist, a bass guitarist, a drummer, and a lead guitarist, all of whom were professionals in their rank. Other musicians in the congregation, who had kept a low profile, because they did not want to deal with Danny, also joined the choir.

The CO found some cards on both inmates, more on Danny, tucked in their folders. All Blackmon had to do was ask me for the cards, and I would have given him up to four, the maximum we give anyone at a particular time. However, he had more than four cards on him without my knowledge or permission. It broke my heart, and I told him so. No one would rule out the influence of sneaky Danny on that day possibly led to his downfall, but it was Blackmon's choice. Sadly, this incident again gave credence to what Blackmon had complained was the COs' stance toward the inmates. Who would fault the COs?

Blackmon was devastated and ashamed. Danny, the church musician, kept on acting as if nothing strange had happened to him; the CO made a mountain out of a molehill. He tried to justify his actions to me by a thousand lies, which he couldn't sell. Anyway, enough of Danny. For weeks after this, Blackmon did not show up for Sunday services or weekly meetings such as choir rehearsal or Bible study. I visited him in his dorm twice or more and encouraged him to "come back to the fold." He would promise to make the next meeting but wouldn't show up. I asked the members of Protestant Advisory Committee to rally round him, support and encourage him. He finally came back to fellowship with other believers and to serve as before. Only he and God could tell if he felt bad and ashamed that he was caught or if he truly felt remorseful for stealing and that he had failed and let himself, God, and others who trusted him down. I want to say parenthetically that we are all in process and "are being transformed... from glory to glory, just as by the

Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18) and that I still don’t doubt the conversion or transformation of Blackmon despite a slip in moral behavior.

Do People Change?

As a chaplain attempting to see changes in the inmates, I have wrestled with the idea whether or not inmates “fake” changes and conversion to cope with prison, whether they go back to the old ways as soon as they return to society, whether the changes we see are ephemeral or lasting. I tried not to give an altar call after every service so that inmates would not respond simply for emotional reasons. To honestly answer Blackmon’s issue, I will use a propositional question, which had agitated my mind for some time. It was further reinforced by a question another CO put to the leaders of a volunteer Christian group in the prison as well as to me, their host. My answer to this multifaceted question—what you are about to read in this chapter—was made into a booklet I titled, *Christ, The Unchanging Changer*. The booklet was first distributed to mark the Protestant Family Day on March 30, 2015, and later circulated in the prison. (The “family day” is an annual event or festival, for all recognized religions in prison, when the inmates can invite their family members to visit and participate in their worship experience. There’s a State menu, which the inmate group/organization often buys other grocery items, seasonings, spices and soft drinks to supplement from their account. For that reason, depending on the organization’s purse, it’s usually a treat for members and a lavish way to entertain their visiting family members. There’s always plenty of tea, coffee, soft drinks, and plenty of good food to eat, unlike other regular days.)

CHRIST, THE UNCHANGING CHANGER

Propositional Question: “How may we truly and appropriately respond to the indictment: ‘Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?’”

The phrase, “the unchanging changer,” which was popular in my Christian circle in the 70s, kept recurring in my mind recently as I considered this indictment we find in the scriptures and which is often quoted to challenge

the work of chaplains and Christian ministers as agents of change through Jesus Christ in the prison system. Of course, the person referred to in that phrase is no one else but Jesus, the unchanging changer.

Background Stories

First, two background incidents that happened in our lobby (of the Correctional Facility) at different times and with different people and months apart. The first was when a set of inmates was being released. They were in civilian clothes, happy to be leaving jail and heading home to rejoin family and friends. As they filed out, my more experienced colleague, the Catholic chaplain, said in his Irish whisper, which was a lot of decibels, "They are coming back." I quickly countered in my most optimistic tone, "No, they are not." He continued to tell me the statistics of recidivism and I again countered that statistics also shows that those that follow a faith-oriented reentry program and join a faith community after their release rarely come back to jail. He continued to say that on the overall the rate is 7 of 10 returns to prison within three to five years. I knew he was right. I just wished he wasn't. He finished it up by saying, "Trust me, I have been doing this work for many years. You'll soon find out. They are coming back." A rookie on the job that I was, I spit out my pointless rebuttal, "What are we doing here then if we aren't changing lives?"

The second incident was months later. I was again at the lobby with the dedicated team of Kairos Christian volunteers. The CO looked at us with a look that suggested that we were wasting our time. He voiced his skepticism in words similar to that of an Old Testament prophet, "Can the zebra change his skin?" I believe he was alluding to the writing of Prophet Jeremiah, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?" (Jer. 13:23a). In other words, we are just wasting time; these people can't change. One of the volunteers took him to task and said that some actually change. Like my colleague, the CO said, "I have been doing this work for over 20 years. I have seen it all. It is a revolving door. They come in; they are released; and they come back again for the same or similar offence within two or three years at the most.

They don't change." I remembered that my colleague had concluded with similar words and I shook my head in pity. As we left the lobby, the CO's words kept ringing in my head, "Can the zebra change his skin?"

Propositional Question

Those two incidents form the background to my propositional question: "How may we truly and appropriately respond to the indictment: 'Can the Ethiopian change his skin?'" Are we to say it is a lie; that the leopard does change its spots? If we take that position, do we have statistics or reasons to support it? If we say it is the truth, that the leopard does not and cannot change its spots, are we then to throw up our arms in surrender and conclude all is lost and hopeless?

I love Bible questions, because they jolt me; they help me to refocus and rethink. But this passage in Jeremiah is more than a question; it is an indictment. It's a rhetorical question or riddle, but the prophet answered his own question and solved his own riddle. Just like the CO alluded to from his experience, this indictment came from an observation by the prophet. Unfortunately, both the CO and the prophet were right. Their clientele has not made significant changes towards morality or good behavior.

Once the prophet Ezekiel in the Old Testament was given a vision of dry bones. The story is in Ezekiel 37. As far as his eyes could see and as far as he could walk were dry bones. The voice of the Lord asked the prophet, "Son of man, can these bones live?" The prophet was not presumptuous, but cautious. He did not say "Yes" or "No." He said, "O Lord God, You know." Following a series of God's instructions to Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and to the winds, the dry bones came together bone to bone, and flesh covered them. At the end, a mighty army arose from a graveyard of dry bones. Only God could do that, as the prophet answered. I keep that in mind when I confront seemingly, humanly impossible situations. It is not necessarily optimism; it is that I simply want to believe that nothing is too difficult for God.

Good News and Bad News

This brings me back to Jeremiah's indictment. If it was a question, I might answer it with a Yes or a No, or, I might be ambiguous like Ezekiel. I can say the answer is Yes, if the leopard meets its creator, but only on that condition. If Yes, by the intervention of a power greater than itself the leopard can change its spots. At the same time the answer is also No. No, because by itself and on its own resources, the leopard cannot change its spot. If we read Jeremiah's words as an indictment, which it really is, then I have to face facts and be less presumptuous. This means that I have to give you both bad news and good news.

JEREMIAH 13:23

(First of Four Scriptural Proof Texts)

I want to read and explain 4 sets of passages of scripture to sincerely and honestly respond to this indictment. The first is the very scripture in Jeremiah 13:23

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil.”

There's no way we can read this scripture and not admit it is true, even though it sounds like bad news. If the Ethiopian can change his skin or the leopard can change its spots, then, by extension, you can change from your habitual evil ways and practices. In the words of my colleague and the CO, if statistics don't lie and if the years they have put into the prison work tell the story, you are surely coming back to jail after your release. The prison is a revolving door for you. You say am I cursing you? No, I am not. I am just being true to my assignment. My assignment today is to deliver to you the good news and the bad news with equal passion. Read with me again the words of the prophet Jeremiah.

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil.”

In all my years in the ministry, spanning close to 5 decades, I have not met a group of people more familiar with Paul's writing in Romans 7 than

inmates. The inmates have made promises to themselves to do or not to do certain things and they have failed again and again. From their own reality, they identify with the struggles and frustrations Paul attested to when he wrote,

“For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do... For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice,” (Rom. 7:15, 18, 19; emphasis mine).

I only wish these inmates will experience the liberating power of the Holy Spirit which Paul talks about in the next chapter, Romans 8.

Did you notice the phrase, “accustomed to” used by the prophet in Jeremiah 13:23? That gives some solid reasons why you cannot change.

First, sin is in you, like the rest of humanity. You, like every other person, you were born in sin (Psa. 51:5); you have a defective heart that is bent towards sin (Jer. 17:9); and you habitually sin (Rom. 3:23). We are all sinners. We sin and do the wrong thing because our hearts are defective spiritually. The problem is twofold: we have a natural bent or tendency towards the wrong thing and, secondly, we face the problem of our inability or weakness to do the right thing.

Second, the wrong practice was modeled for you. For many of you, you live in an environment of sinful habits and low moral value. What you do, and who you become as a result, has been modeled for you in the family, at home and in the neighborhood. Sadly, you can almost rightly say, “This is the life I have known. This is all I have been exposed to.” That’s why; if care is not taken to break the chain, if one family member is behind bars, soon other family members—siblings, cousins, nephews or aunties—will sooner or later be also incarcerated.

We often read a recurring sad commentary in the Old Testament kings’ succession. It says the new king does not depart from the evil ways of his deceased father whose throne he inherits. We read, again and again, “And

he [Abijah, the newly crowned king] walked in all the sins of his father [Rehoboam], which he had done before him... And he [Nadab, the newly crowned king] did evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of his father [Jeroboam], and in his sin by which he had made Israel sin." (1 Kings 15:3, 26; 2 Kings 21:21). It is like the saying, "like father like son." Jesus once charged the Jews who attempted to stone Him, "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do," (Jn. 8:44a).

A car hit a pregnant dog. It survived the crash, but it damaged its two hind legs. The legs did not heal and set properly, and the dog began to drag its two hind legs as it walked. It later delivered healthy puppies. But when the puppies began to walk, they all dragged their hind legs. The owner was concerned and took the puppies to a vet to check them out. They happen to have normal, perfect legs. The only explanation for them to drag their legs was that that was how their mother walked. That was all they'd seen and internalized as normal. That's the pattern of walk that's been modeled for them by their mother, not realizing that the mother walked that way because of a deformity following an accident. Many of you have seen and lived with dysfunction and abnormal and internalized these as normal. That's why change is hard unless it is systemic, involving the whole family, extended family or even the neighborhood.

Thirdly, you've bought into "it" and mastered it by practice; whatever the "it" is for you. The phrase, "accustomed to" is the result of repetitions, practice, practice, and practice, and practice makes proficient. Sinful habit or unhealthy lifestyle has been modeled for you and you have bought into it, internalized it, and practiced it again and again until you become proficient. It has become a second nature. It is in the heart.

God created us with the capacity to function out of habit. Habituation capacity is neutral; it is neither good nor evil. When we do anything, good or bad, repeatedly, we begin to function and perform it without thinking about it. Habituation is a gift of God to make us function with ease, after repeated practice, almost like an automaton. The downside is that habituation is amoral, it works whichever way we train it, either for good or for bad.

We are creatures of habit, truly. For example, when you first started to learn to drive or ride a bike or type or play piano, you were focused on what to do or not do. But after a while it becomes a second nature. You can even multitask while you do it. “Accustomed to” means it is ingrained. It is a second nature. I know you don’t like this, but it is the truth. If you could change, you would have changed a long time ago. Before I give you the good news, you need to hear the bad news first. Habit is powerful.

When I help a counselee, one of the things I like to get across is that we are dealing with a habit problem in thinking pattern or behavior. If, for example, you had a rough, poverty-stricken childhood and had to steal food in grocery stores to survive, if you do not deal with that habit of pilfering, as an employed adult, you’ll have \$5,000.00 of your own money in your wallet and you will still be scheming how to steal food or hide grocery items in a grocery store. It is no longer a question of lack of money; it is a bad habit that has not been confronted and dealt with. You probably know some people who earn a lot of money and yet borrow money from those who earn less. The problem is a combination of a bad spending habit and borrowing mentality that’s not been confronted and broken, which, even with a fat salary, does not break. I wish I could help to bring you to a position where you will admit to yourself: “I am a captive to a destructive force that’s greater than me and under which I am powerless.” I can then give you the good news.

We are like computers. God gave us the hardware and we program it with the software of habit. The computer of your life functions as you program it with the software of your habits and choices. The good news is that if you change the software, you can reprogram the computer of your life. As the quote goes: “Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.” It begins with your thought pattern. Your heart is corrupt and so is your life. If you change the software—the habits and choices—then the computer of your life begins to function differently.

That was the bad news. I have to give you the bad news first. If I consider Jeremiah’s words as an indictment—which it is—then I have to admit

he's right. No, the Ethiopian cannot change his skin and the leopard cannot change its spots. In other words, you can't change. Left to your own devices, you are lost. I can, however, also look at the words and say, Yes, the Ethiopian can change his skin and the leopard can change its spots if... and only if... the Ethiopian or the leopard encounters the Creator. The Creator can recreate. The Creator is bigger than His creation. You and I are still on the Porter's wheel and the Porter is skillful and capable enough to make something new from a marred or deformed lump of clay. There's hope and the possibility of a new life and new lifestyle if, and only if, you encounter a "Higher Power," if I may use that lingo of the 12 Steps Program. This brings me to the good news: God is now offering you a reset key to correct your corrupt and malfunction heart. God promises:

And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart (Ezek. 36:26; NLT; also Ezek. 11:19).

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

(Second of Four Scriptural Proof Texts)

This brings me to the good news and my second verse: 2 Corinthians 5:17.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

This is the good news part. While you cannot change by yourself and on your own resources, there's hope. There's the possibility of becoming a new person. The old practice goes away, the new practice comes. This verse does not say if anyone is in the church, or in the choir, or if anyone is baptized or confirmed, or if any one speaks in tongues, or if anyone can quote scriptures, or if anyone has hands laid on him, or if anyone falls under the anointing. You can do and experience those things and not be "in Christ."

Some of you are so religious you carry your fat Bible all over the place and you can quote scriptures from both sides of your mouth and yet you keep coming back to jail for one crime or another. My question is: Why is all

your religious talking not working for you? Don't tell me you have a prison ministry, because you don't. You have a crime problem. If you have a prison ministry you will be here as a volunteer or vendor, not as an inmate. Do you want to hear the truth? The truth is that you are in religion but not "in Christ." Christ in you will not lead you to commit crime. You are possessed by a religious spirit but not by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will sanctify your life, but religious spirit will keep you busy with a prideful and activity-filled but powerless Christianity.

The verse says if anyone is "in Christ." When you are in Christ, Christ is also in you and the Bible says that's glory (Col. 1:28). Christ then lives His life in and through you. Paul writes, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me," (Gal. 2:20; emphasis, mine.) Christ can do for you what you cannot do for yourself. That brings me to my topic. He—Christ—is the unchanging changer. All power is in His hands. While you were stuck in your rot, He came to rescue you and set you free. That's good news. A new life awaits you. The prophet Jeremiah is right but can be proved wrong if you allow this outside Source of Supernatural Power, this "Higher Power," to be yours.

1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-11

(Third of Four Scriptural Proof Texts)

In my third passage, Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians who or what they used to be; the kind of life or lifestyle they lived before they met Christ. Remember again, the previous verse, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature." These Corinthian Christians came into Christ and Christ came into their lives. The result? They were changed. For them, the Ethiopian changed his skin; the leopard changed its spot. Read the report:

"Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were

some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”

Who were they before they met Christ? They were

- Fornicators,
- Idolaters,
- Adulterers,
- Homosexuals,
- Sodomites,
- Thieves,
- Covetous,
- Drunkards,
- Revilers,
- Extortionists and the like.

What a bunch! I didn't make it up. Any one of these traits (crime or anti-social lifestyle) was vile and abominable enough to be damning. Read the verses again and examine the list. Read the rider at the beginning of verse 11. It reads, “And such were some of you.” They had the same kind of label many of you now have.

Many inmates in our facility are in jail for one or two evils on the Corinthians' list. They are here for:

- Robbery, grand larceny, burglary, which the Corinthians classified as thieves, or for
- DWI, substance abuse, which Corinthians labeled as drunkards, or for
- Sexual miscreants, sexual offense or sexual depravity, which the Corinthians labeled as adultery, fornication, homosexuality or sodomy; *potayto, potarto*, renaming makes no difference; they are simply new nomenclatures for old maladies.

Theme: Proving the Genuineness of Your Faith Before the World

But the change came into these Corinthians. Thereafter, they were:

- Washed,
- Sanctified and
- Justified by the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God.

The prophet Jeremiah's indictment did not come true for them. For them, the leopard changed its spots and the Ethiopian changed his skin by the miracle of being "in Christ." In like manner, you too can be washed, sanctified, and justified. To be washed is to be cleaned up. God is not asking you to clean up yourself first and then come to Him. That will never work. You will forever be trying and messing up, up one day and down two days. He will do the cleaning. One great church hymn puts it best, "What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus." This is not about the chemistry of blood; this is Theology 101. In the Old Testament, we learn that life is in the blood (Lev. 17:11). Therefore, the blood of Jesus represents His life that He gave up for us. Jesus' life, or His blood, cleanses us.

Not only were their sins washed away, they were also sanctified. To be sanctified is to be set apart for God, for a holy use. Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit imparts His righteousness to our lives and bears in and through us the fruit the Spirit that we read in Galatians 5:22, 23:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law."

Washed and sanctified, though good enough, that was not all. They were also justified. To be justified is to be declared righteous or not guilty. It is a word from the court system. It has both negative and positive connotations. In its negative sense, it means to be declared "not guilty." It is the removal of sin or, as it is often explained, to be justified is: "just as if you've never sinned." In its positive connotation, it is the bestowal of righteousness; it is the crediting or imputing of Christ's obedience to our account. In its negative sense justification is the removal of sin and guilt; in its positive sense it is the con-

ferment or imputation of righteousness. “For He [God] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him,” (2 Cor. 5:21; emphasis mine).

We are not just declared, “Not guilty” in the court of heaven, the Judge of the Universe also declares us righteous, as if we had completely fulfilled in our lives all the laws of God. This is what faith in Christ did for the Corinthian Christians and it is what God wants to do for you and in you: to wash you, sanctify you, justify you, and, furthermore, to impute or credit His righteousness to you. That is, the Judge of the Universe Himself declares you righteous.

ACTS 26:9-11; GALATIANS 1:11-16, 23, 24

(Fourth of Four Scriptural Proof Texts)

My last set of scriptures is the story of Paul himself. Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus, was a murderer and persecutor of the Church of Christ. Saul hated Christians, because he thought they were an aberration of the Jewish religion. He was a zealot, a learned and devoted Pharisee. The risen Christ then appeared to Saul. After Saul met Jesus, he became a new person. For Saul, now the Apostle Paul, the leopard changed its spots. This is how the Apostle Paul described his former life in his own defense before the court and King Agrippa as presiding judge (Acts 26:9-11) and how he explained his change and the gospel he preached to the Christians in Galatia, Galatians 1:11-16:

“Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities,” (Acts 26:9-11; emphasis mine).

“But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God

beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood," (Gal. 1:11-16; emphasis mine).

After Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (reported in Acts 9) this was the reaction and the news in town:

"But they [that is, those church members Paul earlier terrorized] were hearing only, 'He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy.' And they glorified God in me," (Gal. 1:23, 24; emphasis mine).

The greatest persecutor became the most ardent preacher of the faith he once tried to extinguish. Yes, they rejoiced and glorified God for Paul's life. Paul's change and transformation was 180 degrees. He made a complete U-turn. He started going in the opposite direction he had earlier walked. The diehard, Judaic zealot changed his mission and message. This same transformation is possible and available to you today. Paul did not and could not bring about the change in himself. He encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus when he was on a mission to arrest and imprison Christians—Acts 9. That's what I offer you today, an encounter with the risen Christ. The Apostle Paul never forgot who he was and how God's mercy changed him. He wrote Timothy, his protégé, "Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief," (1 Tim. 1:13).

Yes, statistics don't lie. For various reasons, 7 in 10 inmates discharged from penal institutions do return to their vomit, are rearrested, and get back into prison. Yes, going by the experience of the CO, this is not likely to be your only bid in the state penitentiary. Like it or not, it may be your reality. If care is not taken to break the chain, incarcerations may become a great part of your family storyline. You may soon have your cousin, nephew, uncle, sibling, and childhood buddies serving jail terms. It will run in the family,

“Like father, like son.” Yet, there is hope. It is the only hope. The hope is in a Person. A Person willing to help you; so willing that He died in your stead for your sins. Everything hangs on the word, “if...” If only you knew Christ; if only you’ll cry to Him today to come into your life, if only today you’ll make Him your Savior and Lord. For, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new person; the old is gone, the new has come.” “Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends,” (Rev. 3:20; NLT).

Are you in Christ? Is Christ in you? “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified,” (2 Cor. 13:5).²⁶

ADDENDUM: Church Members Are on Different Levels in Their Journey of Transformation (and Why Blackmon and Danny may be on the Journey of Transformation but on Different Stations of It)

The Apostle Paul divides the members of the Corinthian church into four groups: 1) Natural (or unspiritual), 2) Babes in Christ, 3) Carnal and 4) Spiritual

2:14But the NATURAL (unspiritual—RSV) man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. 2:15But he who is SPIRITUAL judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one... 3:1And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to BABES in Christ... 3:3for you are still CARNAL. For where there are envy, strife and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? (1 Cor. 2:14, 15; 3:1, 3; emphasis mine)

The learned scribes, Pharisees and teachers of the Law in Jesus’ audience, smart and respectable as they were, would rightly be classified under the natu-

26. This ends the booklet, Christ, the Unchanging Changer, that was distributed to the inmates. Most of the inmates who wrote me after reading the booklet commented on the illustration of the pregnant dog that was hit by a car and had puppies walking funny because they were copying what their mother with deformed legs unwittingly modeled for them. That assured me that they understood the factor of the environment on one’s lifestyle and worldview.

ral, the un-regenerated, the unspiritual, because though they had many things going for them, they did not have the Spirit of God indwelling, leading and controlling them. It is one thing to be well informed, talented, and knowledgeable, but it is another thing to be filled, possessed, led, and controlled by the Spirit of God. One of the problems in the church today is that we honor gifts and talents even when the person is devoid of true insight and a foreigner to the Spirit and things of God.

Four Classes of Membership in the Local Church

In the Four Spiritual Laws/How to be Filled with the Holy Spirit Booklets (by Bill Bright of the Campus Crusade for Christ), the natural man is the person with Christ knocking to be asked into his life. He is the unregenerate person often describes as “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1, 4). Although not part of the Four Spiritual Laws, the Babe in Christ is the new convert who has asked Jesus into his life and Christ is sitting on the throne of his life but who, for ignorance and lack of knowledge, is devoid of the true riches that he has in Christ. While Christ is in his life, he does not have the mind of Christ, yet. He is like a homeless orphan who has been adopted by the king but lives in the palace with the same old mentality and survival tactics of a homeless orphan, still preferring to scavenge for food than relax and be served by the royal attendants. The carnal Christian is the one who has Christ in his life but not on the throne of his life; Self is on the throne while Christ has been dethroned or relegated to the background. He lives by self-made laws and rules which he keeps breaking and feeling worthless for his powerlessness, because the Spirit of God is not fully in charge. The spiritual man is the person who has Christ seated and reigning on the throne of his life. Because Christ is at the helm of affairs in his life, he has peace, joy, love and all the fruit of a Christ-centered life (Gal. 5:22).

As you read the four classes of individuals Apostle Paul identified in the church at Corinth, the question to ponder is: Where do you find yourself on the spiritual spectrum—natural, babe in Christ, spiritual or carnal? Where would you like to be constantly classified?

1. **NATURAL:** this person is not born again. This individual may be well educated, rich and classy. Something, however, is missing in his life, something very vital is missing in the very core of his life; that is, THE SPIRIT OF GOD. He cannot understand spiritual things; he may mock your devotion and think you are nuts, because nothing you do in the church makes sense to him. The natural or unspiritual person needs only one thing: THE GOSPEL OF SALVATION. It is being born again that opens his eyes and begins to shed light on spiritual things—John 1:12, 3:3. He may study and even know the Bible, but he has no revelation of the truth of the Bible. He may be a good person in the eyes of the culture, but we know we are not saved by our human effort or righteousness and that before God, *“all have sinned and come short of the glory of God,”* (Rom. 3:23) and *“all our righteousness are like filthy rags before God,”* (Isa. 64:6). The natural man is a man of the world and a captive to the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:3, 4). Satan, *“the god of this age has [him] blinded”* to Christ and the truth of the Bible.

But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them (2 Cor. 4:3, 4).

2. **BABES IN CHRIST:** this is a young believer, a new Christian. There's nothing wrong with him, except that he may be very ignorant of many things. Given time, good teaching and a “sanctified” environment, the babe in Christ will mature and may be spiritual. Simply out of ignorance, the babe in Christ may behave like the natural person, because he doesn't know any better. He has the Spirit of God and the potential to become a spiritual Christian. Yet, if he is in the wrong environment, his growth may be stunted,

and he may continue to behave like a baby for many years. This becomes carnality. The babe in Christ who is fed the wrong spiritual diet will not grow properly and this leads to carnality. *“As newborn babes,”* the babes in Christ are urged to *“desire the pure milk of the word, that [they] may grow thereby”* (1 Pet. 2:2). Babes in Christ need spiritual nourishment, fellowship, good role models, mentors, and a caring church family. With all these spiritual ingredients, healthy growth and Christian maturity is guaranteed.

3. **CARNAL:** this is a born-again Christian who is not different from a pagan or an unconverted person. He lives in the flesh, is controlled by the flesh, and has a stunted spiritual growth. He thinks and behaves like a natural man because though he has the Holy Spirit in him, he is not yielded to the Spirit. He has the Spirit of God but never learns to obey or yield to the Holy Spirit. He grieves, quenches and silences the voice of the Holy Spirit. Except for the fact that says he's saved and baptized, you have no reason to believe he is a Christian. He may play good roles in the church, but he leans on his own efforts. He does not rely on the Holy Spirit. He may have good intentions and live by rules and self-discipline—signs of carnality—rather than surrendering to the Holy Spirit. He may have learned the wrong things in church; he focuses more on leaders and pastors in church. You hear him say, “My bishop says...” or “The pastor told us to...” Never or rarely do you hear him say, “The Bible teaches...” Sometimes they cling to certain preachers and deify them and worship them as little gods, like the Corinthians. *“For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not carnal?”* (1 Cor. 3:4; see also 1 Cor. 13:11; Heb. 5:12-14). When he dies, he goes to heaven, because he has placed his faith in Jesus, but it is without rewards due to dead works that cannot stand the test of fire. He enters heaven by the skin of his teeth, *“as one escaping through the flames,”* (1 Cor. 3:10-15, esp. v. 15; NIV). I've heard some inmates who said, “I gave my life to

Christ when I was 13 and was baptized in the Holy Ghost.” Yet, you’ve spent the greater part of your adult life in jail. How do you explain that? It is spelled C-A-R-N-A-L-I-T-Y!

4. SPIRITUAL: the spiritual man is Spirit-filled and Spirit-controlled. He is not perfect; he makes mistakes, but his heart or the bent of his heart is to please God. When he falls, he is quick to repent, confess and seek help to get right back. He values fellowship, because he knows that’s his strength and staying power is in the community of believers rather than playing solo. A sharp contrast between the spiritual and carnal Christian is seen in Galatians 5:19-26: one list is the works of the flesh; the second list is the fruit (result or consequence) of being filled and led by the Holy Spirit.

Back to the earlier question: Where do you find yourself on the spiritual spectrum—NATURAL, BABE IN CHRIST, SPIRITUAL or CARNAL? Where would you like to be constantly classified? What will need to change for that to happen? How does Galatians 5:19-26 factor into your answer?

5But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, 6to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, 7to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. 8For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.

10Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; 11for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:5-11).

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION/ MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 9

1. Explain why you agree or disagree that, though we are not supposed to look to people but to Christ, yet carnality in the church and lack of authenticity (or hypocrisy) of its leaders might account for why many people like Danny would be so close to and yet never experience the fullness of the life of the Kingdom of Christ. Discuss.
2. Do people really change? As the prophet Jeremiah asks or indicts, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?” and then pragmatically answers his own question, “Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil.” Discuss.
3. How did the chaplain wrestle with the question or indictment posed by the prophet Jeremiah? Was he able to strike the balance he strived for? Explain.
4. Was the chaplain too blunt and pessimistic, or was he encouraging and projecting hope? Discuss the overall tone of the chapter, especially as a booklet distributed during Protestant Family Day Event.
5. Can anyone save Brother Judas? Could Jesus have saved Brother Judas? As you discuss Judas, consider this: Can anyone save church musician Danny? How and why? Do you have a “Brother Danny” in your church or church choir? Discuss.
6. What factors do the environment and neighborhood play in a child’s development and in shaping the child’s worldview and acquired habits? Discuss if this should be a tenable excuse or reason for the child’s success or failure and how far we must advance this.
Food for thought: Why is it that NOT every child who is a product of those “dangerous neighborhoods” turn to a life of crime and drugs or a cycle of arrests and incarcerations? What makes some victims and others success stories?
7. Do you agree that most of our actions and behaviors are the results of habituation and that change must begin with a focused and intentional de-habituation process? Explain why you agree or dis-

agree.

8. In a paragraph, the chaplain wrote, “We are like computers. God gave us the hardware and we program it with the software of habit. The computer of your life functions as you program it with the software of your habits and choices. The good news is that if you change the software, you can reprogram the computer of your life. As the quote goes: ‘Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.’ It begins with your thought pattern. Your heart is corrupt and so is your life. If you change the software—the habits and choices—then the computer of your life begins to function differently.” Unpack the paragraph and simplify it.
9. They were fornicators, adulterers, idolaters, sodomites, thieves, drunkards, revilers, etc. but they all gave up their antisocial lifestyles. What did the Apostle Paul attribute the change in the Corinthian church to? (Read 1 Corinthians 6:9–11). How many steps did it take them to make the U-turn? Explain your answer.
10. What needs to happen to experience the transformation from “the works of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19–21: “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God”) to “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22–23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law”)?
11. What changed Saul to Paul, a persecutor and murderer to a preacher and martyr for the same faith?
12. Was Paul reformed or transformed? Read the story of Simon in Acts 8:9–24 and compare and contrast it with Saul’s in Acts 9:1–31 to

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explain the difference between reformation and transformation.

Who was transformed, and who was reformed between Simon and Paul? Explain.

13. Food for thought: What is true of your experience: reformation, which is like rearranging the furniture in the room, or transformation, which is like changing the furniture—moving out the old and bringing in new furniture? Have you merely rearranged the furniture (of your heart and life), making the room look different but the same in essence, or have you thrown out the old and brought in new set of furniture?
14. Where do you find yourself on the spiritual spectrum—NATURAL, BABE IN CHRIST, SPIRITUAL or CARNAL? Where would you like to be constantly classified?
15. Discuss: What will need to change for that (that is, #13) to happen? How does Galatians 5:19-26 factor into your answer?

Theme: Spiritual Warfare, Demonology & Delegated Authority of the Believer

Dear Chaplain,

I've followed my friends to the *Kairos Bible study and prayer meeting a couple of times when I can't find a good excuse to turn them down. Many inmates in my dorm regularly attend and they have been very good to me. There is this inmate in the group who makes me feel uncomfortable. He is always the first to volunteer to pray over any prayer request. I think he's phony. He keeps talking to the devil and commanding Satan when he prays. Aren't we supposed to pray to God? My friends don't seem to be bothered by that and I have not discussed it with any of them. I don't think Satan is a figment of imagination, as some believe. But I don't think it is wise to taunt Satan—he's powerful. To me, we should just leave Satan alone. Rebuking Satan is foolhardy; it is like picking a fight with an opponent who is bigger and more experienced than you. That's number 1. Number 2, he claims to have some healing power and, to tell you the truth, I don't think he has healed anybody since I've been going to the meeting. That's why I think he's fake. Yet, many people want him to pray for them when they are sick, or a family member is sick. If he can heal the sick by his prayers then let him go to the hospital, pray, and heal and discharge the patients. It's his kind of fanaticism that puts many people like me off.

Larry

*Kairos is a volunteers-led Protestant prison ministry

Larry, I wish you could see the look on my face as I read your letter. I was smiling and chuckling because of two similar incidents that I remembered as I was reading your letter. I will tell you the stories, because they helped me understand where you are coming from.

One afternoon, a 55-year-old white inmate, serving his first incarceration, walked to the chaplains' office, showed us his ID displaying the program label and told us that he had been sent to us to be a chaplain's clerk, as his assignment in jail. The problem was that he was neither on the Catholic call out for Mass nor on the Protestant Sunday service call out. We told him he couldn't be our clerk unless he was a participating member in one of our services in the Christian community. He said he was not religious but was also not averse to religious services. When asked which group he preferred he said his grandparents were Presbyterians. That's how he became my clerk and started coming to the Sunday services. Luckily, I didn't have a clerk at that time.

[As a side comment: He was in prison charged for having sexual relations with his stepdaughter. Incest is one crime that other prisoners consider heinous, hideous, and below human dignity, for reasons best known to them. A person jailed for incest is more likely than not to have a rough time with other inmates during incarceration. My clerk was not an exception, though he had many things going well for him. He was admitted into the college program and was hopeful he could get his associate degree in jail. He was happy to be working for a chaplain. In addition to the relatively good pay it looks good on his resume to be a chaplain's clerk. He was having visits from his wife. He was attending Sunday service regularly even though he hadn't yet shown interest in participating in the weekly Bible study or Kairos' prayer and share meetings. However, barely 3 months as my clerk, he was attacked and badly beaten up by three or four inmates because of the nature of his crime. He lost some teeth and needed medical attention. Following this he had to be transferred from our jail to another. Before his transfer he left for me (and the Catholic chaplain) a scathing, stinking letter of many pages. In his parting note to us he was ranting and venting his anger against God—yes, specifically against God and against the hypocrisy of the penal system. He also was skeptical and

expressed serious doubts if we, the two chaplains, ever cared or simply pretended we did or if we, like he presumed others were doing, were also making fun of him behind his back.]

A couple of Sundays after he became my clerk, I had to be away from the jail on one Sunday, so I asked my volunteer to hold the service in my absence. This volunteer was also facilitating the Monday night Bible study for inmates. The following Monday when my clerk reported for work, I asked him how the service had gone. My clerk replied,

“I’m glad you asked, because I had planned on talking with you about yesterday.” Then bluntly, he said, “He was not like you.”

“Of course, we cannot be the same.” I then asked him about my number 1 concern, “Were you able to understand his accent?”

[Again, I need to fill you in on some background detail: My volunteer²⁷ is an ordained pastor from Pakistan. He has an accent, like I do. Conscious of my accent and not wanting it to hinder my communication as a subject teacher in the school system or pastoral ministry in church, I have done many things to compensate (and sometimes overcompensate) for my accent. For example, when I was a schoolteacher, I didn’t want any (lazy or unmotivated) student to use my accent as an excuse for not doing well. What I did was to put my lesson notes on PowerPoint and chart paper so that any student who had a problem understanding me might see and read what I was saying. I taught mostly from the back of the room, with my PowerPoint clicker in hand. Sometimes I let the students read my PPT notes. When I became the prison chaplain, I realized I couldn’t put my messages on PowerPoint. So I type out my sermon, in its entirety—usually about 2,500 words or more; front and back, 1 sheet, 0.5 margin on all borders, formatted in Times New Roman 11, 10 or 9-point fonts, as the case may be. I make copies, which are given out to all attendees as they walk in. I don’t read my sermons, but I sometimes direct them to the page or paragraph that I’m on if they look lost. Fast readers among them would have read the sermon while we were busy

27. My volunteer, the Reverend (Dr.) J. Din, is now the Protestant chaplain in a State correctional facility.

setting the stage for the service and just wait for my preaching to put the flesh and drama to it.]

The clerk responded, “Well, I struggled a bit with his accent but that’s not the problem. I struggle to understand you, too. The sermon sheets you give out help.” He stopped and asked me pointedly, “Do you really know this man?”

“Of course, I do. If I don’t know him well, I wouldn’t feel comfortable to leave the service in his hands in my absence. He’s understudying me as one of the prerequisites for him to gain some experience in order to be certified as a prison chaplain. What happened yesterday?”

“He thinks he can heal everybody. I kept my eyes open. I will give it to him: he’s very passionate, but it was like drama to me...”

Aha! Now I understood his problem. You see, my volunteer believes one of his spiritual gifts is the gift of healing (1 Cor. 12) and this comes through in his preaching and ministration. I believe in healing too, but I am a middle-of-the-road person in the way I approach ministry. I want the person who is just beginning to show interest in Christian faith (like my clerk), and a young Christian or new convert, as well as the seasoned mature Christian to feel comfortable and gain something under my ministry. It is the same mindset when I write. I know serious Christians buy and read Christian books but I write having in mind that some of my readers may just begin to show interest in Christianity and don’t have to be pushed away or put off by heavy church stuff. (For reasons best known to them, self-professed atheists have read my books from cover to cover and requested for more of my publications.)

Pastors can no longer assume that everybody sitting in the pews on Sunday morning was churched or had been to Sunday school like people in previous generations. For that reason, I don’t take for granted that everybody in prison uniform listening to me on Sunday was familiar with the story of Moses and Exodus, or Samson and Delilah, or Daniel in the lion’s den, or Paul and Silas in prison. I also try to stay centered on a theme or passage of Scripture rather than jump here and there from one passage or Bible story to another. You can understand why my 55-year-old clerk who was still peeping into the faith felt

out of place when everything was going over his head, theatrical and comical. That incident came to mind as I read your letter. It was not that my volunteer was wrong or off course; it was that what he did and the way he did them were over the head of my clerk who was still a stranger to church language and practice.

The second incident that came to my mind happened during the Covid-19 national lockdown, around March-April 2020. In response to the spiritual needs of the country, many telephone prayer groups sprang up. I was invited to join one. During one of the telephone prayer conference the pastor assigned to lead the session that day started giving “word of knowledge” (1 Cor. 12) after a couple of prayer points. This is something that God, by His Spirit, reveals to you about a situation, person or work of the Spirit. The pastor said, “There’s someone on this prayer line who’s been having a pain in your shoulders; the Lord has just healed you... There’s a sister who is very anxious and questioning about what’s going on right now and worried about your finances; the Lord wants you to know that He’s in charge...” Now, I am familiar with the operation of the “word of knowledge.” I do not know this pastor, but something in me shut down as he transitioned from prayer to giving word of knowledge. The way and manner he came across to me, or the way I received his ministration that day (which may be my problem), was that he was playing to the gallery; he was playing to the crowd and just wanted to feel important. I might be wrong, but I know there’s a right time for everything. King Solomon says, “To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven,” (Eccl. 3:1). Put these two incidents together and you will appreciate why I was giggling while reading your letter. Now, let’s get back to your question.

I suspect you’ve heard the saying, “Don’t throw away the baby with the bath water.” Please keep that in mind. I want to pinpoint and address certain issues from your letter. I want to address themes such as spiritual warfare, praying for the sick, authority of the believer, casting out demons (or demonology) and such things. Relax! I’ll break it down. I don’t believe my volunteer did anything wrong. We just happen to do things differently. I am not saying

the brother in question in your letter is doing anything wrong. He hasn't healed anybody, as you wrote, because we don't have the power to heal, God does. We simply obey and act on God's word as we pray, expecting God to honor his word. One reason we know God is the healer and that it is God's will to heal the sick is because Jesus spent a good portion of His ministry healing the sick, showing us that that's the desire of God. I know there are excesses, and I will try to address that too, as briefly as I can. Acts 10:38 summarizes Jesus' ministry this way: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him."

UNDERSTANDING THE SPIRITUAL REALM AND SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Larry, I'm happy you don't buy into the idea of Satan being a figment of imagination or metaphorical entity in fairy tales. Beyond that, I don't know about your spiritual persuasion, but most people believe that there's more to life than the physical world that we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands; they believe that there's a spiritual or invisible, spirit-controlled dimension of life; a realm dominated by good angels and bad angels (or demons). Faith people even believe that the spiritual realm towers above the physical realm and that things and events first happen in the spirit realm before they manifest in the physical world; that the things we see with our eyes or read in newspapers around the world are the results of activities, or spiritual warfare, in the spirit realm. Why do they believe such, or why would anyone in this scientific age believe in the world of the unseen spirits? Please let me direct your attention to the following 5 scripture passages. I'll give you one paragraph background to the stories, but you may have to read the entire chapter or the context to fully appreciate what was going on.

1) Exodus 17:8-13; emphasis added

8Now Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim. 9And Moses said to Joshua, "Choose us some men and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomor-

row I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand.” 10So Joshua did as Moses said to him, and fought with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. 11And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. 12But Moses’ hands became heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. 13So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.

Israel was at war with the Amalekites. From what you read it was apparent that the direction of the war, success or failure, for Israel, led by Army General Joshua was not dependent on the strategies or military prowess of Joshua but on the activities going on on the mountain with Moses holding the “rod of God” in his hands. Today, we will say that Joshua had some spiritual advantage over the Amalekites, and that would be correct. This Israel-Amalek warfare narrative is an example of the interface between the physical and spiritual worlds, between the heaven and earth, between the material and immaterial spheres of life, between the seen and unseen worlds and how one controls the other. It also makes it clear that one realm—the spirit realm, controls or dictates to the other; that it first happens in one realm—spirit realm, before it manifests in the other realm. Scary? Yeah! It’s scary to think we are puppets dancing to tunes from the outer space, or that our fate is determined like pieces on the chessboard being moved here and there by an invisible player. That’s why it is important to understand spiritual warfare and learn how we can play to win and how we move from a place of being acted upon to a place where we act upon and are proactive.

II) 2 Samuel 5:22-25; emphasis added

22Then the Philistines went up once again and deployed themselves in the Valley of Rephaim. 23Therefore David inquired of the LORD, and He said, “You shall not go up; circle around behind them, and come upon them in front of the mulberry trees. 24And it shall be, when you hear the sound

of marching in the tops of the mulberry trees, then you shall advance quickly. For then the LORD will go out before you to strike the camp of the Philistines.” 25And David did so, as the LORD commanded him; and he drove back the Philistines from Geba as far as Gezer.

The Philistines attacked the newly crowned Israelite king, David. David, being a godly and a spiritual man, prayed and sought God’s strategy and help. God instructed David not to go up but to circle around behind the Philistine army. That’s not all. God told him to advance only after hearing “the sound of marching in the tops of the mulberry trees.” Who are those marching whose sound is heard on the top of the trees? You guess right: Angelic beings! They are the invisible heavenly army at the side of David. God’s message concludes by assuring David, “For then the Lord will go out before you to strike the camp of the Philistines.” Again, it was not David’s expertise but God’s supernatural power that gave him victory. David marshaled his army and they fought the best they could, but it was God’s invisible heavenly army that struck down “the camp of the Philistines.” The editor of the Daily News of the era, not being privy to the activities in the spirit realm, would have published an unbelievable result of the warfare. The editorial front page in bold caps could have been: **THE UNTHINKABLE HAPPENED!** Subtitled: **It’s Inexplicable That the Philistines’ Well-Oiled Army Lost To David’s Ragtag Army.** It was a war instigated by the Philistines to teach Israel and David a lesson because, from a statistical point, it was supposed to be a walkover for them. Nevertheless, the Philistines, with all their chariots and well-equipped and experienced large army, lost the battle to David’s ill-equipped conscripted army. As we now know, the game changer was the activity in the spirit realm.

III) 2 Kings 6:15-17; emphasis added

15And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” 16So he answered, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” 17And Elisha prayed, and said, “LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he

may see.” Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Here, the king of Syria, an enemy neighbor nation to Israel, was puzzled that someone in his camp had been a traitor and informant leaking his warfare tactics to the king of Israel. But his subjects corrected the king that there was no defector in the Syrian army “but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom,” (v. 12c). The king of Syria then sent a large army to capture this prophet Elisha. When the servant of Elisha saw the Syrian troop—the scene in the physical world, he went berserk. He knew they were outnumbered and stood no chance. He couldn’t believe how Elisha could be calm. Elisha was unworried, because he had seen the heavenly army. He prayed for the Lord to open his servant’s eyes so he too might see into the spirit realm. When he did, the servant of the prophet knew they had help. Those who say, “One with God is a majority,” have a point here. One more Old Testament example, Daniel:

IV] Daniel 10:10-13; emphasis added

10Suddenly, a hand touched me, which made me tremble on my knees and on the palms of my hands. 11And he said to me, “O Daniel, man greatly beloved, understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for I have now been sent to you.” While he was speaking this word to me, I stood trembling. 12Then he said to me, “Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words. 13But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; and behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left alone there with the kings of Persia.”

Daniel was praying and fasting for the captivity of his people to be over, as God had promised through prophet Jeremiah would happen after 70 years. For days and weeks Daniel continued in prayer but saw absolutely no changes, no message from God, and no answer to his prayer. Though he did not see

any physical sign, a lot was happening in the spirit world. When finally, the angel came with the answer the angel revealed the reason for the delay. The angel said that from the first day Daniel knelt to pray, God answered and released the angel to bring the word. There was a strong demonic power, the spiritual/demonic ruler over the kingdom of Persia, which waylaid the angel for 21 days, until a mightier angel, Archangel Michael, came to his rescue. From this we know that prayer is not simply a spiritual activity between the believer and God. No, there's a third party involved; that third party is the enemy of God and of the believer. For 21 days there was a spiritual warfare in the heavenly places, two opposing forces—one of evil, the other of good—were in conflict. It was a warfare of which Daniel or any other human was unaware.

V] Acts 12:1-11 – A New Testament Example

1Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. 2Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. 3And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. 4So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

5Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. 6And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. 7Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands. 8Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." 9So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that

leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him.

11And when Peter had come to himself, he said, “Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people.”

There is really nothing more for me to add to this story. We see here two kingdoms, two spheres of authority, at work in this story. The powerful, politically connected king Herod represents one sphere, the physical realm. The powerless but prayerful church people represent the other sphere, the spiritual realm. King Herod had political power. All the resources and authority of the Emperor in Rome were behind Herod to quell any disturbance and maintain peace in Palestine. The same Jewish religious leaders who had conspired with Pilate to have Jesus executed by crucifixion were courting favors with Herod to have the leaders of Jesus’ movement arrested and killed and the young movement brought to an abrupt ending. They seemed to be having their way because Apostle James, one of the key leaders of the Jerusalem church and one of the three inner circle disciples of Jesus, had been killed by Herod. Apostle Peter, without doubt the most influential disciple and leader, had been arrested and jailed. Peter would have been judged and killed right away but no execution was done during religious festivals, and this happened to be the Passover festival season. Herod had Peter imprisoned in the maximum-security prison facility. There were four shifts of four soldiers to guard Peter, with two soldiers always chained to him, one on each side and two soldiers guarding the door. The only recourse for the church was prayer. The church prayed earnestly, fervently, and constantly. In surprising answer to their prayer, God sent an angel at night to release Peter from the dungeon, from chains and iron doors and the sure prospect of execution. Even Peter thought he was seeing a vision. In the end, the tables were turned. The powerful Herod became the powerless king and the eventual fatality of the story (vv. 20-23), and the powerless church became the powerful group and victors in the story (v. 24).

By the way, all recorded miracles in the Bible: Joshua and the wall of Jeri-

cho, Gideon and his surprising victory with 300 soldiers over an innumerable army of Medianite soldiers, including Jesus healing of the lepers, healing the woman sick with the issue of blood for 12 years, Jesus walking on the water and Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead after 4 days in the grave, all of these are examples of the powers of the spirit realm intruding into the physical and prevailing.

From these 5 passages several truths can be deduced about spiritual warfare, including the following:

1. There are activities in the unseen, heavenly realm that influence and/or can determine the outcome of an earthly activity or direction of our lives or nations. (Exo. 17:8-13; 2 Sam. 5:22-25; Dan. 10:10-13).
2. We enter this realm of the unseen and become active participants in it, and the direction events on earth take, only by prayers, especially intercessory prayers. (Exo. 17:8-13; 2 Sam. 5:22-25; 2 Chron. 7:14; Dan. 10:10-13).
3. When we pray, God sends reinforcement or divine ammunitions to defeat Satan's purpose, move things in the heavenly realm in our favor, and this in turn, affect the direction of events on earth (Acts 12 and Dan. 10).
4. Satan seeks to frustrate God's purposes for His creation and for our lives, because we are the objects of God's love. Therefore, Satan's hatred for God, and his jealous rage over humanity's position with God, is directed at God's creation, including humanity, the easier targets for Satan.
5. Somehow, for good or for bad, the events in the heavenly realm seem to control or dominate the physical world; or, "it happens first in the unseen realm before it manifests in the physical, material world;" or, simply put, "we win or lose the battle on our knees."
6. God has equipped us, empowered us, and has enlisted us to join Him in sealing the defeat of Satan, which was wrought by Christ in His death and resurrection. (Eze. 22:30; 2 Chron. 7:14; Mt.

18:18).

7. Spiritual warfare, therefore, by simple definition, is our deliberate efforts to take ownership of the battles over our lives and areas of spiritual stewardship by using God's resources to frustrate and terminate all satanic influences, and establish Christ's defeat over Satan for us and thereby advance God's purposes on Earth. (That's a mouthful!).

How are we engaged in this warfare that we have not asked for, and how do we win it? I'm glad you asked. First, by knowing we are not helpless, and we are not alone, for "the battle is the Lord's," (1 Sam. 17:47; Exo. 14:14; 2 Chron. 20:15-17); that even when we are outnumbered in the physical, "those who are with us are more than those who are against us." Second, by knowing that we are not fighting for victory, we are fighting from victory because Jesus, our Captain has defeated the enemy and made us "more than conquerors through Him [Christ] who loved us," (Rom. 8:37; Jn. 16:33; Col. 2:15; 1 Jn. 4:4; 5:4, 5). Lastly, we win by faith, prayer, standing on the Word of God and holding firm, persistence, putting on the whole armor of God, and being relentless knowing that we are destined for victory (Eph. 6:10-18; 1 Pet. 5:8, 9; Jam. 4:7). To conclude this section, let me repeat my definition of spiritual warfare given in 7 above. Spiritual warfare is our deliberate efforts to take ownership of the battles over our lives and areas of spiritual stewardship by using God's resources to frustrate and terminate all satanic influences, and establish Christ's defeat over Satan for us and thereby advance God's purposes on Earth.

DEMONOLOGY AND SPIRITUAL WARFARE

One of the items Jesus teaches us to pray for, in the prayer we traditionally call The Lord's Prayer, is deliverance from the strategies, wiles, evil machinations, and devilish effects and clutches of the evil one. Before concluding that model prayer, Jesus taught us to pray, "And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one..." (Matt. 6:13). Also, in His High Priestly

prayer for His disciples in John 17, Jesus also prayed to the Father, “I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should KEEP THEM FROM THE EVIL ONE,” (verse 15; emphasis mine). Satan is audacious; he even tempted Jesus, the Son of God (Matt. 4).

Unlike those who hold that the word Satan or Devil is a generic term for negative forces and wrong things in the world, Jesus, in His temptation, dealt with a real Satan and He also taught that Satan was a true spiritual personality, though Satan often camouflages and uses people and circumstances as agents. At one point, Jesus turned to Peter, His very outspoken disciple, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men,” (Matt. 16:23), because at that time Satan was speaking through Peter, unbeknownst to Peter. At another time, Jesus, realizing the diabolical plans of Satan to sift Peter, Jesus alerted Peter to spiritual realities of events in the unseen world which Peter wasn’t aware of and also assured Peter of victory, because the Lord had prayed him through and of his role to other disciples. “And the Lord said, ‘Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren,’” (Luke 22:31, 32).

Jesus told many parables to illustrate the kingdom and in many of these parables we see the activity of Satan, often referred to as “the wicked one,” or “the evil one.” For example, Matthew in his Gospel of St. Matthew chapter 13 tells of the parable of the sower. This farmer or sower scattered seed in four different soils, representing human hearts (13:1-9, explained in vv. 18-23). The seed that fell by the wayside and were immediately eaten up by birds represent “anyone [who] hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart,” (vv. 4, 18). In the same chapter in the parable of wheat and tares/weeds (vv. 24-30, explained in vv. 36-43), “The enemy who sowed them [the weeds] is the devil,” (v. 39). Satan seeks to dilute, pollute, or corrupt the works of God. Someone has said that when God is building a cathedral you can be sure that Satan is building a chapel nearby. Satan never sleeps. He is

tireless. He spends his time roaming to and fro, looking for a target. (See Job 1 verse 7 for Satan's answer to God when God asks him where he's been. See also Apostle Peter's admonition about this busybody in 1 Peter 5:8, 9.)

The devil works best under two extremes: 1), where there's unbelief in his existence, or calling Satan a phantom or a product of people's imagination. 2), preoccupation with Satan; places where people are too conscious of Satan's activities. In either case, with undue publicity or disregard, he works his way into the system. Don't forget that one of Satan's most successful schemes is to pose as the guy in your corner. The devil with a permanent frown on his face isn't the real one; that's just an angry neighbor or a disgruntled client. The devil that wears a friendly smile all the time is the real one of whom you should be wary, because deception and lies are the best tools in the devil's arsenal. "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light." As the saying goes, "All that glitters is not gold." "If it too good to be true, it's probably so."

Satan thrives in telling half-truths. Nobody started off with an ambition to be a junkie. People are sold lies about fun and drugs only to become addicted to drugs and opioids or die of overdosing. Nobody wakes up and decides he will one day be an alcoholic. The devil sold them a half-truth and lured them into a lifestyle of booze, hard liquor, recurrent DWI and incarceration. Young people were promised fun and a good time when they picked up electronic cigarettes in different flavors only to become addicted to nicotine or land in a hospital fighting for their lives due to the damaging effects of vaping. If the devil tells absolute lies, few people will fall for his lies. Yet, there's always an element of truth in his lies; he just does not tell you everything. He tells the fascinating or attractive side of the story and leaves out the damning portion. Half-truth and half lie were the way Satan deceived Eve in Genesis 3, and it's the way he still works best. Many gang and occult members, alcohol use disorder (AUD) and drug addicts who find out too late. Possibly the smartest brains are in US prisons today. They are in jail, because they believed a lie of the devil and have been living a lie. Until the lie blows out and the devil is

unmasked. For many trapped in this vicious cycle and serving a jail term you would think that finally the devil has been unmasked and the lie disrobed, but, unfortunately, it is not so. Many remain blind and are groping in the dark.

I once left my collection of books in my bookshelf in a building owned by a Christian organization in Ibadan, Nigeria, between 1979 and 1982 or thereabouts. The building was a rendezvous for many young university graduates. My library had been well stocked and resourced over many years. When I returned to collect my books, every book on marriage and demons/spiritual warfare was gone. That tells me one of three things about those two topics—marriage and Satan: 1) they are troubling to Christians, 2) Christians want to learn more about them or, 3) somehow, those two, marriage and Satan/spiritual warfare, are probably connected in their minds and/or experience—and I wouldn't be surprised if that were true.

Satan wants to be worshiped and if he can get you to pay more attention to him, then he's got his desire. In one of the temptations Satan said to Jesus "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me," (Matt. 4:9), desiring worship from Him. At the outset it was Satan's [then Lucifer's] unholy ambition and pride that led to his fall. "For you [Lucifer] have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.'" (Isa. 14:13, 14; Eze. 28:14-17). Lucifer coveted God's supreme authority and wanted to usurp God's throne, if he could. He desired God's sovereign power and position but not God's love and compassion. Absolute power that's not tempered, balanced or counterbalanced by unconditional love and mercy is despotic and satanic.

Some Christians are so much into spiritual warfare—binding and loosing—that they mention the devil in their prayers more than they mention the name of Jesus, because, to them, everything is about rebuking and resisting and casting out devils. You'd be surprised to know that there are Christians who cast out demons from bottled water before they drink it. Even grace

over meals is another chance to rebuke Satan. That's paranoia! Their prayer language is always: "I bind you Satan... I rebuke you Satan... I cast you out you demon of so-and-so..." On and on, they go. Inadvertently, the focus is on Satan, not on God. Larry, I can understand if this was what made you feel uncomfortable in the Kairos prayer and share meetings.

Good or bad, whatever you focus on is what gets projected and enlarged in your view and soon becomes the reality in your life. If you focus on your problem, that's what becomes magnified. Soon, its overblown weight will crush you. If you focus on God, God gets magnified in your life. Your problem becomes something your Big God can handle, and it becomes manageable to you as well. We need to spend more time focusing on God and worshiping God in our prayers. Guess what? If these Christians keep calling the devil's name again and again in their prayer, they are giving the devil the attention he craves. The other extreme is to treat him as nonexistent. We need to maintain a good balance. Putting on the whole armor of God, (Eph. 6:10-18), helps us to be grounded in the Truth.

We Are Spirit Beings Having a Human Experience

As I said in the opening paragraphs, we live in two spheres, two worlds—a physical sphere and a spiritual or spirit sphere. This is equally true of our human makeup. There's a material and an immaterial part of our nature. From the Genesis account of creation, we read, "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them," (Gen. 1:27). That is the highest compliment to humanity—that we are "made in the image of God". However, that's not all. Genesis 2:7 provides additional detail, "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." God "breathed... the breath of life" or transferred a portion of Godself into a mold of clay that became a living soul. God is eternal. God breathed His eternal Spirit (His breath, His wind) into a mold of clay, and humanity came into being. There's a part of what made us humans that ever existed, was never born, because it was as eternal as God is, and was from

God. We are spirit beings; we received our life from God's Spirit; we came from God.

Scripture makes us understand that in our human formation, we are part dirt ("formed [from] the dust of the ground") and part deity—we receive our original life from the breath of God. We are a tripartite being; we are spirit, soul and body (1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 4:12). We are spirit beings; we have a soul, which is the center of our will, emotion, thought, feelings, mind, and we live in a body or tent. "For dust you are, And to dust you shall return," (Gen. 3:19c). But to the believer, "to die is gain," (Phil. 1:21) because "to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord," (2 Cor. 5:8).

Properly understood, we are not human beings having a spiritual experience. Rather, we are spirit beings having a human experience. There's a part of you that was never born and will never die. Before you showed up here, before you were conceived in your Mama's womb you were in God's mind, you existed in the Spirit world (Eph. 1:4; Psa. 139:13-16). You then picked up flesh, because you would need that for your assignment here on earth. You showed up to deliver your message and that may take you some 0-100 years or a little more. You'll shed this flesh and return to the spiritual world. Be sure you deliver your message before you return. Some live outside of their God-ordained purpose and fail to deliver their message, because they lose their connection with the Spirit. To live disconnected from God is to miss life's highest purpose.

We serve the Lord God Who is one. Yet God exists as a community of relationships: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In like manner God made us for relationship, for community, and we cannot be truly human or understand our human makeup in isolation, only in community. In the beginning, God looked at His creation and declared, "It was very good," (Gen. 1:31). Then God took a second look, as it were, and observed, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him." Eve entered the picture. So, God "created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created" (Gen. 5:2). God is one but not alone; the one Creator God exists as this community of relationships:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so we understand that part of what it means to be made in the image of God is “to not be alone.” We are made for covenantal love, for community of relationships, beginning with marriage, then home, family, the church, and neighborhood.

Satan Is a Fallen Angel, Not Omnipotent, Not Omniscient, a Created Being and Not Self-Existent; Not in Any Way on Par with God

To summarize, I mentioned earlier that prayer is not just you and God; there is a third party. That third party is the enemy of God and of all that is good. We live in two realms, spheres, or kingdoms: the physical realm/domain and the spiritual realm/domain. In Daniel chapter 10, which is one of the passages cited earlier, Daniel knelt to pray, and his prayer was answered—same day! Yet, the answer did not come to him for 21 days. An evil spirit waylaid the angel bringing the answer to Daniel’s prayer. There was a battle in the heavenly realm between two angels—one sent by God and another by Satan. God sent reinforcement in the person of Archangel Michael to His emissary to have a breakthrough. Likewise, if you read the book of Job chapters 1 and 2 you will come across a dialogue in the heavens and how it affected and dictated the events in Job’s life. Job’s name came up in the heavens and his life on earth was no longer the same. You recall that in Exodus 17, we read of a battle between the Israelite army and the Amalekites. The deciding factor for victory was not Joshua’s military strategy or artillery. It was the raising up of Moses’ hands and the “rod of God” on the top of the mountain. A reporter would report the battle, but only with the eye of the spirit can one know the source of the victory. Long and short: There is a spirit realm and it controls the physical. The battle rages fiercely on our knees and in our minds.

The other extreme is to overrate Satan. We do this when we place Satan on an equal footing with God, or that he is the opposite counterpart of God. Light is the opposite of darkness, peace is the opposite of war, boy is the opposite of girl, but Satan is not the opposite of God, because they don’t belong in the same category. Satan is a created being; God created him in an undated

past. God is the Self-existent, eternal, uncreated Being, with no beginning or undated past. God is almighty, sovereign, omnipresent and answerable to no one else. Satan is not omnipotent or omnipresent. Satan is limited, but he has at his command many demons and minions who represent him and carry out his will of his kingdom.

As the story of Job illustrates in Job chapters 1 and 2, Satan could not do whatever he wanted with Job. First, Satan complained that he was restricted from touching Job because of God's "hedge around him, around his household," (1:10). As we learned, Satan needed permission from God to do anything to Job, but, in each instance, the permission was limited (See Job 1:12 and 2:6.) The Creator-God did not create a monster He couldn't control or destroy. Even Satan knows his fate and he is well aware that his time will soon run out. Satan was once Lucifer, an archangel of God in God's service until pride led to his fall. His counterpart would be another archangel, like Gabriel or Michael.

Keep these four pristine truths in mind:

- 1) SATAN IS A LIAR! He specializes in lies (John 8:44).
- 2) SATAN IS A DEFEATED FOE. Jesus conquered him for us on the cross (Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14, 15; Rev. 1:18; 12:11; 1 Cor. 2:8; 2 Cor. 11:13-15, esp. v. 14).
- 3) THE DEVIL IS STUBBORN. He will keep coming back to attack again and again (Eph. 6:13c, 14). Satan did not tempt Jesus only at the beginning of His ministry and in Gethsemane; the devil kept coming back to tempt Jesus in many subtle and overt ways. Luke 4:13, "*Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time.*" Hebrews 2:18, "*For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.*"
- 4) THE DEVIL KNOWS HIS FATE is the bottomless pit and that the end is near, (Matt. 8:29; 25:41; Luke 10:18; Isa. 14:12; Rev. 12:7-10; 20:2). He simply wants to take as many down with him as

he can. God never intended hell for human beings created in God's image. Hell is what you get when you shut out God and God in the end God let you "have it your way," (Matt. 25:41).

DELEGATED AUTHORITY OR BINDING AND LOOSING

DAY 11

Let's start with this poser: How would you describe a boss who gives you an assignment but without prior proper training, adequate resources, and authority to carry out the assignment? Would you say he's kind? Inconsiderate? Cruel? Committed to your success and to getting the assignment done? Setting you up for failure? Not a boss but a bully?

Now let's flip that. What would you say of God if God were to send His people into a wicked and demon-infested world without adequate preparation, protection, training, resources, power and authority to carry out the assignment of being salt and light? Would that be a God worth serving? Is that the picture of a trust-worthy, compassionate Deity?

We Are to Be Equipped with Power from on High: This is a promise to saved persons; not for those seeking salvation. This power is so indispensable that Jesus urged His disciples not to embark on anything until they were endued with power from on high. Quality education, seminary training, internship, and mentoring, good and necessary as these are, cannot substitute for "the power from on high." This is not the Holy Spirit for salvation, because the disciples were saved at this point. In fact, they had also received the Holy Spirit. In John 20:22, the resurrected Jesus "breathed on them [His disciples who cowered in a room for fear], and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" Yet, Jesus sternly warned His followers:

"Behold, I send the promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem UNTIL YOU ARE ENDUED WITH POWER FROM ON HIGH," (Luke 24:49; emphasis mine).

"Endued with power from on high," meaning, clothed with God's power; filled, imbued, and energized with a power that's spiritual, divine, supernatural and, simply, out of this world.

We have this injunction repeated in Acts 1:4, 5

“And being assembled together with them, He [Jesus] commanded them [the Disciples] not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, ‘which’ He said, ‘you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now,” (Acts 1:4, 5).

The disciples had to wait then, but we don’t have to wait anymore, the Holy Spirit is now with us. The Holy Spirit came on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost and He has been active in the church since. This is the era of the Holy Spirit to build and empower the church of Christ. This is reminiscent of the declaration of John the Baptist as He introduces Jesus that Jesus “will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire,” (Matt. 3:11). The only way to do God’s work or service successfully is through God’s power, or more appropriately, by God Himself working in and through us. Even Jesus did not begin His ministry until He was “filled with the Holy Spirit,” (Luke 4:1) and led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil forty days (Luke 4:1). Thereafter, Jesus “in the power of the Holy Spirit,” (Luke 4:14) came into Nazareth. At the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus opened the scrolls to where Isaiah had foretold of Him and read,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord,” (Luke 4:18, 19).

We read later that all that Jesus accomplished was because “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him,” (Acts 10:38). One of the conditions the apostles put forward for the selection of the deacons in the early church was that the individual should be “full of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:3). Note how the mention of the Holy Spirit is always in connection with supernatural power in these passages: Matthew 3:11; Luke 4:18, 19; 24:49; Acts 1:8; 6:5, 8 & 10 (referring to Stephen,

the first martyr); 10:38.

You Shall Receive Power: It's a spiritual and supernatural assignment that we are given to carry out. Therefore, it's going to take more than natural talents and skills, political connections, or charisma. Acts 1:8 is the key verse to the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts of the Apostles could have rightly been named *The Book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit*. It is the Holy Spirit in action working through simple, unlearned, politically unconnected men and women. It was God at work through human agency. It is still God's design for His church and Christian ministry.

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth,” (Acts 1:8).

The disciples/apostles were able to witness effectively through the power of the Holy Spirit. God is very willing to give us the Holy Spirit and His power. The Book of Acts is the key to our understanding of the Church and Christian ministry. My late friend, the Reverend Dele Ijagbulu, would recommend to every young pastor the reading of the book of Joshua in OT, the book of Acts of the Apostles and 1st and 2nd Timothy. The book of Joshua is to learn and understand spiritual warfare, the book of Acts is to understand the source of spiritual power and victory, and the letters to Timothy is to understand and appreciate the place of character, integrity, and mentorship in ministry.

“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him,” (Luke 11:13).

As you and I know, the task before God's church is impossible without God's divine resources and backing. Thankfully, we are not alone; we are not powerless; we are not left to our own resources. Jesus has given us the keys—symbol of authority and control—to adequately represent Him on earth. And, it is His church; He's the Captain/Head. I will highlight some items about that authority He's given us.

I) Inner Power (Greek: Dunamis) and Delegated Power (Greek: Exousia)

God has not left us unequipped. In passages such as Luke 10:19, Matthew 18:18-20; 28:18-20 and Mark 16:17, we learned about Jesus authority or power of attorney He gives us to transact spiritual business in His name and on His behalf. To start with, the indwelling Holy Spirit, which is your birth-right as a child of God, a new creation in Christ, is an inner source of power that transforms us into another being. It is possible to believe, be saved and have your name in the Lamb's Book of Life and not have this empowerment by the Holy Spirit. It is your right, but ignorance may keep you locked out of the Holy Spirit's power. In Acts 19:2 Paul asked some disciples in Ephesus, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They told Paul, "We have not so much as heard of whether there is a Holy Spirit." Paul then laid hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit—verse 6. (See Acts 19:1-7).

The Greek: exousia (as in Luke 10:19 or Matt. 28:18) is authority, power of attorney, or delegated power; dunami (as in Acts 1:8) is ability or energy-within power. Exousia is ability to deal with what's outside; to speak and act with confidence. We can do this knowing who's behind our every word and move. It is the delegated authority to cast out demons and heal the sick. A traffic police does not have the power to stop an 18-wheeler, but he has authority to do so. When he raises his hand to the driver, the driver recognizes the power of the State behind him and stops. That's what they call "respect the uniform" in the armed forces. A judge may be a 120-pound lady and the criminal a 300-pounder of raw muscle. The judge is not scared and is not relying on her own power to give her sentence, because she knows that the power and resources of the State are behind her. She does not have inherent or inner power; she has authority to do business in the name of, and on behalf of the State. In like manner, when we step out in the name of Jesus, we are not relying on our power but acting on His authority, knowing fully well that He'd back us up.

God gives us both authority power and inner power. Dunamis is inner energy; self-generating. From dunamis we have English words such as

dynamo, dynamite and dynamic. That gives you the idea of what power we are speaking of. It is inherent or ability-power. This power comes through the Holy Spirit of God working in and through us. Dunamis is ability to deal with what's within us, to master and conquer the enemy within ourselves, to overcome the flesh, to gain mastery over pride, lust, greed, self and worldly thoughts and pursuits. If you can shout, "I've been changed," and it is true; it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

There are wealthy people and political figures who are movers and shakers in the society but whose private lives are in shambles. While they have authority-power by virtue of their position, wealth, and connections, they lack this inner-power. They run big corporations and chair gigantic projects; they can slay the giants out there and get the votes but the giant of lust, greed, and passion within them is what they have not mastered or conquered. Once every other week or every other day, national newspapers and TV stations headline political giants whose marriages are in shambles and heading for divorce, or the law enforcement finally nabs them in their fraudulent and shady business deals, or have pled guilty to certain crimes and may be heading to jail. These are men and women in authority but without inner strength they misuse and abuse their authority. God gives us authority-power to represent Him and do exploits in His name and God also gives us inner-ability power so we may live above lusts and worldliness. Take away the word POWER out of the Christian vocabulary and it becomes a religion of rules—dos and don'ts, moral instructions, and principles but no power. (See Rom. 1:16; 14:17; 1 Thess. 2:13).

II] The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven

"And I [Jesus] will give you [His disciples] the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven," (Matt. 16:19).

In Matthew 16:19a – Jesus promised, "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven..."

The image of the keys is probably drawn from Isaiah 22:15-25, where

Eliakim, who succeeds Shebna as master of the palace, is given “The key of the house of David ... So he shall open, and no one shall shut; and he shall shut, and no one shall open,” (22:22; see also Rev. 1:18; 3:7). The One who has all authority in heaven and earth and to whom all things have been committed by the Father (Matthew 28:18-20) now gives the same authority to His disciples.

Keys symbolize authority or access. During one of his sermons, the Reverend Gary Simpson, pastor of Concord Baptist church in Brooklyn, NY, took out his key ring with a bunch of keys. He pointed to each key as a symbol of authority and restricted access, but much more, as a testimony to how blessed he is and many things to be thankful for. First, the key to his house meant he had a place to go; the key of his car meant an important possession; the PO key is a symbol of status, not everyone has a PO box; his office key is testimony that he has a job; the key to the church is testimony that he plays an important role in the religious community; and on and on he kept raising different keys. The number of keys in your key ring is a testimony to the different places you have access from which others without the keys are restricted. The prison chaplains carry many keys, sometimes about 40, on our key ring to gain access to many parts of the facility. (Presently I have 39 keys on my key ring). Yet, we are restricted from many areas and we don't have the keys to many places. The prison superintendent on the other hand has fewer keys, maybe about 3 keys, on her key ring. She can go anywhere and open any door, because she has master keys. Jesus gives us the master key—His name. That master key opens the doors to heavens above, doors on earth and under the earth. The name of Jesus, the master key, unlocks hell and throws wide open the windows and doors of heaven. In Philippians 2:9-11, we read:

9Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, 10that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, 11and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus promised to give the keys—not singular but plural—of the kingdom

of heaven. I think of keys not in terms of a prison chaplain who is weighed down with too many keys yet restricted access but rather in the sense of the prison superintendent with fewer keys which can lock and unlock every part of the prison. This verse has been a subject of debate for centuries.

- Some say the “keys” mean authority to carry out church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20). Jesus gives the same authority to bind and loose (Matt. 18:18, 19) in the context of church discipline. Jesus honors with His presence, “*where two or three are gathered in [His] name*” and sanctions the judgment of His church in the life of church members.
- Some say the keys give authority to announce sins as forgiven (Jn. 20:21-23). The resurrected Christ says to the disciples, “*If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained,*” (Jn. 20:23). (Also, 2 Cor. 2:10, 11; 10:8; 13:10; Jam. 5:16).
- Some say the keys mean the opportunity to bring others into the kingdom through the preaching of the gospel (Acts 15:7-9). We do not decide who enters the kingdom of heaven, but God uses each one of us to help others find the way to eternal life. God confirms and affirms the words of His sent servants spoken in His name— Mark 16:20.

All the three interpretations are plausible and acceptable. Some, however, restrict it to Peter, claiming Peter used the key to open the door of the Kingdom to the Jews in Acts 2, and he also opened the door for the Gentiles into the Kingdom in Acts 10.

III] Binding and Loosing in the Jewish Mind

In Matthew 16:19b Jesus says, “...and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

“Binding” and “loosing” were administrative terms in daily Jewish life. Whenever a Jew came up against the Law of Moses, that Jewish person was either “bound” or “loosed” regarding that law. To loosen was to permit; to

bind was to prohibit. To loosen was to permit or declare it allowed. To bind something was to declare it forbidden or put under the law. Even today much of the practice of Judaism is dependent on the consensus opinion of the board of rabbis, and sometimes, on the opinion of a respected knowledgeable rabbi. By their proclamations or declarations, they loose or bind, permit or forbid, ratify or nullify, allow or disallow the Jewish action on, or in response to, a position on an issue.

As their rabbi, Jesus did this binding and loosing for His disciples without using the same words. This was what Jesus did when He allowed them to take the grains of wheat in the field on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-8). The dietary laws of the Old Covenant and Sabbath restrictions were revised by the apostles in the light of the understanding of the work of Christ. In that way, the apostles of Jesus loosed both Jewish and Gentile believers from the dietary laws, (the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 being an example). That means we don't have to be Jewish first before becoming Christians. Therefore, that frees me to eat pork, which a Jew wouldn't eat (Acts 10:9-29; 15; Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8; Gal. 2:11-16; 5:1-6; Col. 2:16-23; 1 Tim. 4:1-5).

The power for binding and loosing is something that the Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day used. They bound or loosed an individual in the application of a particular point of the law. Jesus promises that Peter and the other apostles would be able to set the boundaries authoritatively for the New Covenant community. The Apostle Paul might be alluding to this in Ephesians 2:20 where he wrote that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone." By this, Jesus gave both the permission and authority to the first generation of apostles to make the rules for the early church, and indirectly, the inspired writings that would guide all generations of Christians.

Jesus did not write any instruction book and did not leave a manual for church life; Jesus delegated the authority to do all that to His disciples. Relying on His teachings and the Holy Spirit, that is, the Spirit of Christ in them, they were able to interpret the intent of the old law and the mission of the crucified Savior. Has someone ever argued with you, "No, Jesus didn't say

that, Paul or Peter did,” trying to minimize some portions of the Scripture? [implying that the printed red letter words of the Bible (that is, the words spoken by Jesus) are more authentic than the rest of the New Testament. Unfortunately, some preachers behave this way too.] Of course, Jesus didn’t say or might not have said those things, but He empowered His disciples to do so by the Spirit’s guidance, and we can be sure that whatever they—Peter, Paul or John—wrote or said had Jesus’ stamp of approval. They had Jesus’ authority to bind and loose, to set new boundaries and pull down the old limiting walls of traditions.

In the Spirit-filled proclamation of the gospel, the church has been given the keys (authority) to bind demons and disease and to loose the prisoners of sin, addictions and sickness from their bondage and captivity unto salvation in Jesus—just as Jesus did while on earth.

IV] Binding and Loosing in Jesus’ Name in the church today

Whatever Jesus said to the apostles then He is still saying to us today. Why? Because what is at stake is His Kingdom, His mission, His mandate. It is the cause for which He left His glory to die on a cruel cross to pay for the sins of sinners like you and me. Today, we are the bodies Jesus inhabits, the vessels He works through, the tools He uses to carry out the work of redemption. Consider these words of Jesus to you. Read them and hear them as the first disciples heard them from the Master’s very lips.

- Matthew 16:19 “And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”
- Matthew 18:18 “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.
- 18:19 “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.
- 18:20 “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I

am there in the midst of them.”

This authority that Jesus gives is for transacting His business for the extension of His Kingdom, not for personal gain. We cannot bind persons or human beings, because we are created with free will. What we may bind are the foul and ungodly spirits behind a human action, such as the spirit of oppression, spirit of aggression, spirit of infirmity, demonic forces in operation, deceitful and lying spirits. Again, we have no power or authority over another individual to bind or loose, command or commandeer him or her. The authority is given us to defeat the enemy of the cross, to advance Jesus’ Kingdom, to transact spiritual business on His behalf for the good and benefit of His church, not for private gain. Whatever we do agrees with heaven, with what heaven has already decided and bound. Binding and loosing is empty if it is not on heaven’s agenda.

Binding and loosing are echoing the desires of heaven, as partners with God. We are like pre-recorded MP3 players pronouncing and amplifying what heaven has already decided or decreed. We bind or loose in agreement with what heaven has decreed as God’s will and verdict. Some translations bring this out by reading “whatever you bind on earth should have been bound in heaven.”

Here is Matthew 16:19 in 3 different translations:

- I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of the heavens, and **whatever you might bind on the earth shall have been bound in the heavens**, and whatever you might loose on the earth shall have been loosed in the heavens (Berean Literal Bible; emphasis mine)
- I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and **whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven**, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven (New American Standard Bible; emphasis mine).
- I will give you the keys to the kingdom from heaven. **Whatever**

you prohibit on earth will have been prohibited in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will have been permitted in heaven (International Standard Version; emphasis mine).

In other words, our binding and loosing on earth are not autonomous but are preceded by what God in heaven has bound or loosed. We succeed only as our actions and prayers mirror heaven's desires and decisions. We cannot expect God to back us on what's not on heaven's agenda.

V] So, What Is Binding and Loosing, Praying for and Praying Against?

I'm glad you asked. As has been mentioned, these are legal terms based on the power of attorney Jesus gives us.

To BIND is to PRAY AGAINST, to forbid, to resist, to rebuke, to render ineffective, to disallow, to come against, to curse (Christians are very creative in the use of language). Here are some examples:

We say, IN THE NAME OF JESUS

1. I bind... All forces of darkness militating against...
2. I forbid... All demonic activities working contrary to...
3. I silence... (or I reject...) Every tongue contrary to the will of God...
4. I paralyze... The influence of all foul, ungodly and unclean spirits that have been at work in ...
5. I come against... You, Satan, and all your hosts at work in...

To LOOSEN is TO PRAY FOR, to release, to allow, to permit, to declare, to proclaim, to establish, to bless. Here are some examples:

We say, IN THE NAME OF JESUS

1. I loose... The spirit of salvation on this assembly
2. I release... The power of God and the free operation of the Holy Spirit...

3. I declare... It shall be well with you, it is well with you...
4. I proclaim... Peace to this neighborhood...
5. I command... The dawning of a new day... I command open heavens in this place...

VI] What's the Difference in These 3 Prayers for Healing?

Are you ready to have some fun with me? Ready or not, here I come. Imagine three ministers praying for their sick brother. The first prayed, "O God, You are a merciful and loving God, please heal our brother James. He's been afflicted for too long. He's Your son and servant. Have mercy on him and on us. Please, Lord, heal our brother. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen." The second minister prayed, "Lord we thank You for the finished work of Christ. He bore our sins and infirmities on His body on the cross as He cried, 'It is finished.' We declare that by His stripes, by His wounds, we are healed. We rejoice in His finished work for our salvation and deliverance from all afflictions. We receive healing for our brother James in the name of Jesus and on His finished work and we thank you for healing our brother James, in Jesus' name. Amen." The third minister prayed, "Satan, we come against you in the name of Jesus. Jesus went about doing good and healing all the sick. We take authority over every spirit of affliction and oppression that's troubling our brother. You spirit of infirmity, loose your hold on his life right now, in the name of Jesus. Amen." So, what's the difference?

Somehow, not intentional though, the first minister seemed to believe that God is able to heal but assumes God is withholding healing, so we must plead with God and appeal to God's mercy. From his language, it does not appear that God is intrinsically committed to healing anyone unless we plead with Him and appeal to Him to do so. We can safely say that the second minister believes that healing is in the salvation package and God has done that for us. He claims the healing and affirms God's word. It looks like the third minister believes that God is not the problem, Satan and evil spirits are. God is on our side, not against us. Good health, not sickness, is God's will and design (Exo. 15:26; 3 Jn. 2). So, he takes warfare against Satan and speaks directly to the

problem as he sees it—a satanic attack/oppression. Which prayer will God answer? All of them.

God's not man. It is the heart that prays. We may also be reminded that it is not the prayer—or the right prayer, the rightly worded prayer—that heals or brings deliverance; it is God and He does so in His mercies. God is not bound to some formulae to hear our sincere heart cries and answer our prayers. It is important to see the theological difference. I use these 3 to also show how our temperaments factor into our theological persuasions, denominational worship styles and our practice of prayer. When someone says, "Pastor, I need some hot (or fervent, or arrowhead) prayers," he often means warfare kind of prayers. You can almost tell what pastor he's been listening to and to which church denomination he belongs. This is another reason why Christians who are locked into some formulaic praying style or a narrow one-size-fits-all view of prayer have difficulties praying together with Christians of other persuasions and denominations.

Prayer is not always a gentleman's enterprise; sometimes, effective prayer is the enterprise of a disgruntled, angry saint who is tired of the status quo. It is this "holy discontent" that drives us to pray and intercede for others. When the events in our surrounding disturb our spirit, it awakens in us a holy anger to become God's hammer or sword to dismantle the works the enemy. When I teach intercession or spiritual warfare, one question I often ask is: When you read the papers, or listen to the news, or hear what's happening in your neighborhood, what stirs up your holy anger? What bothers you most or makes you cry to God, or keeps sleep away from you when you hear or see the plight of the suffering? If you were God Almighty with unlimited compassion, passion, and power, what would you use your enormous power to change immediately in the community or in a friend or family member's life? We need to pray for the mind of God, to love what God loves and hate whatever God hates. We need this kind of holy anger that sees things and events from God's point of view and goes to battle against God's enemy.

When the Ammonites planned an attack on Jabesh Gilead, a part of Israel, the Israelites sought for terms of peace. "But Nahash the [king of the] Ammo-

nite replied, 'I will make a treaty with you only on the condition that I gouge out the right eye of every one of you and so bring disgrace on all Israel,'” (1 Sam. 11:2; NIV). Saul was the untested, newly elected king of Israel at the time. We read his response to the Ammonites who wanted to “bring disgrace on all Israel”. “When Saul heard their words, the Spirit of God came powerfully upon him, and he burned with anger,” (v. 6). That’s holy anger or holy discontent. Saul jumped into action. It was the first battle he fought and the event that solidified his reign. It’s the same kind of anger that gripped Jesus as we read His actions in two instances in Mark 3:5 and 11:15. It is the kind of holy or positive anger displayed by American activists and civil rights advocates like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr.

It is for this reason that we don’t always pray for... that is, pray for a thing or someone, using positive words or speaking to God on their behalf. Sometimes, we pray against, we pray with a holy anger using—are you ready for this?—negative or curse words, or speaking directly to Satan. Jesus spoke directly to a two-faced fig tree and cursed it (Mark 11:12-14, 20-24). Sometimes, we also take up the mantle of a prophet and we pronounce blessings and curses, as the situation requires. Jeremiah, at his call as prophet to the nations and kingdoms was set up to “root out and to pull down.” That sounds negative, destructive, and brutal. However, that was not all; he was also to “build and to plant.” That’s positive, nourishing and edifying.

“See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant,” (Jer. 1:10).

VII] What Is Authority and How Is Authority Exercised?

The example of the Roman Centurion in Matthew 8:5-13 is illustrative. Please read Matthew 8:5-13 to reacquaint yourself with the passage even if you are already familiar with the passage. We note the following highlights:

Authority is delegated. “I am also a man under authority,” the centurion said. It is a person under authority that can exercise authority. The centurion in Palestine is under the authority of the Roman Emperor in Rome; that is,

in good relationship with the emperor, in good connections with the emperor such that whatever he says or does is as if the emperor is saying or doing them. He can represent the emperor and people respect him and accord the honor and obedience they would give the emperor. Whatever he says or does in the name of the emperor has the emperor's backing and the resources of the Roman Empire. If the centurion loses that position, he immediately forfeits the power and privilege he previously wielded among soldiers. Or, if he is posted out of Palestine, he no longer has any word that carries weight in Palestine. Why? His authority is delegated and has jurisdiction. It is not an authority he carries with him wherever he goes and which he can exercise whenever he wants to at whim. It is delegated authority.

In like manner, when we are under the authority and lordship of Jesus Christ—in right relationship with Christ—we can transact spiritual business in Christ's name with Christ's backing and heaven's resources and blessings. Christ has delegated His authority to us.

Authority is dependent on relationship to the source of that power. Read Acts 19:11-17. The seven sons of a Jewish chief priest, Sceva, attempted to cast out demons following Paul's pattern and using the name of Jesus. They said to the demons in the demon possessed, "We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." The demon said, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?" The demon then sprang on them and tore them to pieces. They used the right name—Jesus—but they had no identity or claim of power to the name of Jesus.

Authority is exercised through the spoken word, usually spoken calmly, authoritatively, not necessarily by yelling or screaming. "Speak [not yell] the word only," the Centurion told Jesus. "And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it. Speak the word only, and my servant will be healed." (Matt. 8:8, 9). Only a weak army general or centurion yells or barks his command (with the exception of having to address a large group of soldiers at one time). In fact, he is not a leader but a bully. Can you imagine a judge, dressed in her official robe, sitting on the bench with her gavel in hand yelling her verdict?

That's usually not an indication of power or sense of authority but of a small mind. Jesus exercised spiritual authority over the problem by speaking the word, even from a distance, and the servant was healed. Authority is usually exercised through the spoken word as from a superior to a subordinate or from a judge in a court or through the gesture of a hand of a traffic officer to a fast-moving vehicle.

We know that volume or loudness has nothing to do with spiritual authority but we sometimes inadvertently shout or yell—"YOU FOUL (or LYING SPIRIT), I REBUKE YOU IN JESUS' NAME! COME OUT OF HIM IN JESUS' NAME!" Some say the devil is not a gentleman and he's hard of hearing. Who would deny that? Even Jesus, at the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus prayed calmly to the Father, (John 11:41, 42), but after that Jesus turned to Lazarus's grave and "He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!'" (v. 43). It was not the decibel of Jesus' "loud voice" that woke Lazarus from his deep sleep of death; it was the authority of the Son of God, the Resurrection and Life Himself (Jn. 11:25). Some said Jesus used a "loud voice" to make certain those nearby who had weak or no faith would hear Him so as to give testimony that He was and is the Resurrection and the Life.

Mark 11:22, 23 "So Jesus answered and said to them, 'Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever SAYS to this mountain, "Be removed and be cast into the sea," and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he SAYS will be done, he will have whatever he SAYS,'" (Emphasis added).

Here, Jesus says that the person who "does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he SAYS will be done, he will have whatever he SAYS." I guess the question now is: What do you say or what are you saying today? You might just have it! Would you be better (or worse) off if you had what came out your mouth?

VIII] Distinguishing between Power and Authority

POWER is the ability to rule or perform a task, (Greek: "dunamis."). This power is inherent. A 300-pounder wrestler or bouncer has some inherent

ability-power by virtue of his muscles. The power is in him and he can do things that other people cannot do. He can body slam you if you step into the ring with him. We have power through the Holy Spirit and indwelling Christ (Acts 1:8; Phil. 4:13). Jesus said to his disciples, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you...” We can overcome many things and achieve extraordinary things, because we are energized from within. “For it is God who works in [us] both to will and to do for His good pleasure... I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me... I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me... Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Phil. 2:13; 4:13; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:20, 21).

AUTHORITY is the right to rule or perform a task, (Gr.: “*exousia*.”). This authority is conferred; it is based on relationship. It is delegated power. For example, the chairman/CEO is going on a long trip overseas. He calls you to his office and asks you to deputize for him while he is away. That’s power of attorney. You have his delegated power or authority to make decisions, make purchases, sign checks and do all that’s necessary to run the business effectively until he returns. For that period, you are him [the man] when he’s absent. In like manner, a police officer, a judge, a governor... all these exercise authorities that is conferred on them based on their position and rights conferred by the State. The police officer cannot stop an eighteen-wheeler trailer by use of force or power. Yet, by his outstretched hand the driver applies the brakes, because he recognizes the power of the State behind the officer’s uniform and badge. In like manner, standing before the judge may be a 300 pound, muscular offender and the judge may be a lady weighing 100 pounds. The judge has no power of her own but relies on the authority of the State to carry out her assignment. They say, “Respect the uniform, not the man.”

The apostles Peter and John exercised this authority in the name of Jesus when they healed the man lame from birth in Acts 3; and so did the Apostle

Paul in setting a demon-possessed girl free in Acts 16:18. Another example of authority is seen in the centurion of Matthew 8:5-13. We also note that this authority is based on relationship, not just some formulaic words as we see in the example of the seven sons of Sceva in Acts 19:11-20, esp. vv. 13-17.

IX] Starving amid Plenty

Four things to note:

- a. Resource: Jesus has the keys—symbol of supreme power. He has the power, we don't.
- b. Representation: Jesus has given us the keys—His authority—to establish His Kingdom. We've got the power! We are His representatives. Say, "I represent Jesus."
- c. Relationship is key: We are in Him to whom "all power in heaven and on earth" has been committed and He is in us.
- d. Responsibility: Let us go out and use the keys to open and close, bind and loose, forbid and release for the Kingdom of our God.

Do you know Jesus? Do you have the right to use His name? Will heaven back you, because Jesus recognizes you as one of His own? If we—Christian people, blood bought and redeemed—if we knew what tremendous power and possibilities are available to us through Christ, we would forgo everything and seek that connection and power in and through Christ. Nonetheless, here we are today, starving amid plenty and powerless because we've been deceived to settle for gimmicks and other poor substitutes of divine power.

F. F. Bruce, in his book, *The Book of Acts, Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 77–78 said regarding the healing of a cripple by Peter and John in Acts 3:4–6,

According to Cornelius a Lapide, Thomas Aquinas once called on Pope Innocent II when the latter was counting out a large sum of money. "You see, Thomas," said the Pope, "the church can no longer say, 'Silver and gold have I none.'" "True, holy father," was the reply; "neither can she now say, 'Rise

and walk.”

This has become one of the most quoted sayings of St. Thomas Aquinas. F. F. Bruce did not write this with an anti-Catholic sentiment, for he goes on to say that the “moral of this tale may be pondered by any Christian body that enjoys a fair degree of temporal prosperity.” (page 78). Neither do I mention it with anti-Catholic sentiment but to call on all of us to consider how far we are from our NT roots.

X] What Are the Weapons of Our Warfare That Are Spiritual in Nature?
I will briefly mention some.

1. The name of Jesus—Mark 16:15; John 14:13; Acts 4:12; 16:18; 1 Samuel 17:45-47. The name represents a person. In legal terms, this is the power of attorney to transact Jesus’ business on His behalf till He returns.
2. Delegated or Passed-on Authority of Jesus—Luke 10:19; Matthew 28:18-20. Gr.: *exousia*—delegated power or authority. We are messengers on assignment. We don’t exercise fear because the greater/higher One is the Sender.
3. The Blood of Jesus—Revelation 12:11; Exodus 12:7, 13; Genesis 4:10 compared with Hebrews 12:24. We really don’t know how this works, because there’s no direct command in scriptures to “plead the Blood of Jesus,” but we know it works. The Blood of Jesus reminds the devil of his defeats. Some suggest that we plead the Blood of Jesus in Jesus name, since we have direct promise to pray in Jesus’ name. “In Jesus’ name I plead the Blood of Jesus against ...”
4. The Word of God—Matthew 4:4, 7; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 2:13. “The sword of the Spirit.” Jesus countered Satan and overcame every temptation by using the scriptures—the Word of God, as His weapon.
5. Prayer—Matthew 26:41; Ephesians 6:18; Jeremiah 33:3. Satan

fears prayers and he will try to keep us from praying. S.D. Gordon widely traveled speaker and prolific author of more than 25 devotional books in the early 1900s said, “The real victory in all service is won beforehand in prayer. Service is merely gathering up the results.” He also said, “The greatest thing anyone can do for God and [humanity] is pray. It is not the only thing; but it is the chief thing.” The apostles were resolute regarding the place of prayer in their priority and would not be distracted. They opted to delegate other necessary and important matters and declared, “We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

6. Praise—2 Chronicles 20:1-30; Acts 16:25-34; Psalm 22:3 (KJV). Jehoshaphat won a battle with a praise team in front
7. The Holy Spirit—Acts 1:8; 2:4; 4:8, 31; John 14:17; 1 John 4:4. Power—Gr.: *dunamis*—dynamite, dynamo—self-generating power; inner power, inner ability through the Holy Spirit. We have both authority power and inner power.
8. Radical Love—Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 12:19-21; 1 Corinthians 13:13. When everything fails, try love. Love always wins. The best way to conquer an enemy in flesh and blood, that is, enemy not Satan, is radical, sacrificial love. (A good hearted but poorly educated inmate, mentioned in chapter 1, always wearing a disarming smile whom I fondly called my deacon, described this as “killing them with kindness.” I explained that the “killing” seems to negate the “kindness,” and makes it like doing a good deed with a bad motive. Radical love—*agape*—is pure in motive and deeds.)
9. The Gospel Message—Romans 1:16; Hebrews 4:12. The Gospel Story has inherent power in itself, power in the Story.
10. The Promised Presence of Jesus—Matthew 18:18-20; 28:18-20; Hebrews 13:5c. You are NEVER ALONE.
11. Our Testimony, that is, the power of a holy living—Rev. 12:10, 11; John 14:30. We are salt and light, Matt. 5:13-16.

12. Fasting—Mark 9:29; Acts 13:1, 2; 2 Chronicles 20:3; Matthew 4:1-11. Some things require sacrifice of comfort.
13. Fellowship—Matthew 18:18-20; Proverbs 27:17; 17:17; Hebrews 10:25. There's a corporate anointing on gatherings.
14. Perseverance—Luke 18:1-8; Matthew 15:21-28; 1 Corinthians 10:13. Quitters don't win and winners don't quit.
15. Time out, Withdrawal or Rest—Mark 4:34-38; 6:31; Matthew 10:23; 14:10-13; John 10:39, 40; 11:53, 54. Even Jesus retreated, spoke in parables, and selectively chose His crowd when the heat was increasingly on. You don't have to fight every battle. You win some by withdrawing. "He who runs lives to fight another day," is a wise saying.
16. Fleeing—2 Timothy 2:22; 1 Corinthians 6:18; 10:14; 1 Timothy 6:8-12; Genesis 39:7-13, esp. vv. 10 and 12. You win sexual temptations faster by running away from tempting situations than by praying and speaking in tongues. Joseph in the Old Testament ran away from a flirting lady. He lost his coat but eventually gained a crown. Samson, the outstanding macho man of the Old Testament, enjoyed the teasing of a woman and didn't run when it was the wisest thing to do. Samson let out his Nazarite secret; he lost his supernatural power and the enemy gouged out his eyes.

In Conclusion and Back Again to Your Question

In the early 1990s, I was the Protestant Chaplain of the University of Lagos, Akoka, in Nigeria. I had 9 members with high potential assisting me as chaplain assistants²⁸. They were a motley crew. Two or three had a taste for the

28. I recommended the 9 chaplain assistants, amongst whom were 2 women, for ordination as pastors in September 1995 under two well-established and globally acclaimed Pentecostal denominations, because I saw God's gift in them and I believed, under my tutelage, we could harness, nurture and provide a platform for the gifts to blossom. Usually, I preached twice a month, one of the assistants preached once a month, and I used a guest preacher once a month. After I relocated to the US, one of them became the chaplain, so, in God's foreknowledge, it was

extreme manifestations of spiritual gifts and I thought we could mellow down the excesses. One of the chaplain assistants had a 9-year old daughter who had sickle cell anemia. She was a pretty, smart, gifted storyteller and deeply spiritual young girl. In September 25, 1991 (a few days from her 9th birthday—Oct. 3), she had an episode of pain, possibly more intense than usual pain crises. As the mother was driving her to the hospital she sat in the back-seat of the car and was praying in tongues. She told her concerned mother not to worry that she would be okay.

Barely 30 minutes after admission, she was gone. This was about 5:30 pm. The parents would not accept this verdict and before long 4 or 5 of my team of ministers were in the hospital praying over the girl to come back to life. I was in a donated office that I used for study, which was not disclosed to any. The owner of the gated office-building complex was not a member of the congregation of the university chapel. My late wife knew I had a study room in the city arranged for me by my mentor, the late Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo, but she didn't know the place. No one could reach me until I got home in the evening after the closing hour traffic rush. This was before the days of cell phones. How unbelievable! I drove to the hospital and joined the team. We kept praying all night. The parents were in a different room while the rest of us were praying over the girl. The doctors and nurses were cooperative. Sometime past midnight and before daybreak the parents came to join the rest of us. They told us they were at peace with the situation and we should stop praying. Roli Awala was the youngest person I ever buried. Word spread around that the chaplains were praying to raise a girl the doctor had pronounced dead. Nobody said anything to me, but I knew some in the congregation were uncomfortable. Maybe some were disappointed in my leadership; maybe some expected a more dignified response from a university chaplain.

a seamless transition. God has blessed me with many wise decisions in life and ministry. In most cases, I can honestly say, "I didn't fully understand what I was doing." From hindsight, however, I can say it was the Spirit in action. Jesus had said of those born from above, "*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit*" (Jn. 3:8).

One African American lady in the congregation—the only person who reached out to me, an assistant registrar in the university, came to me, out of respect, because she was confused and wanted me to help her understand. She said when she first heard the story that the chaplains prayed all night for the dead to wake up she was not surprised, because she knew my team of ministers could do such. When she lamented, “My goodness, where was Reverend Ojewale?” then they told her I was part of it, and that’s what she couldn’t understand. “Why, Reverend Ojewale, why?” I said because we believed God could raise the dead and we serve a God who is all-powerful. “But she didn’t get up, Reverend Ojewale.” I then explained to her that if I had been the first on the scene in the hospital, things might have taken a different turn. But, coming in about two hours and seeing my team of ministers in earnest prayer with their Bibles open, I was not going to dampen their spirit. “Reverend Ojewale, but you are their leader and mentor and they look up to you. If the girl woke up, it would have been a different story.”

This is how I concluded, because she could not take it in. I told her I was proud to be the leader of a team of ministers who dared to believe that God could raise the dead and that God could do it through them, even if we did not raise the dead. I told her that any day I would be happier with a group that waved the Bible in God’s face, reminding God that Jesus said to His disciples, “Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons,” (Matt. 10:8) than one that had lost sight of the miraculous. What I didn’t tell her, which was perhaps my main reason, was that if I had persuaded them to stop praying and accept that the girl had been taken from us and received into the Father’s house with Jesus, those two or three self-proclaimed radicals on my team would have the luxury of telling the story from their own point of view and would forever insist that they would have prayed the girl back to life if I had not intervened. You see, failure, in life and ministry, is a learning experience, a humbling experience particularly in ministry.

Larry, that’s why I’m impressed, and will by no means discourage this brother who believed God to heal the sick in answer to his prayer and continued praying for the sick even if none has been healed, as you said. I’m

encouraged that he dared to believe in a supernatural God of power. We have one of two choices: 1) to believe a God who is loving, compassionate, bigger than our problems and willing and able to help or heal us or, 2) believe a God on the same level with us, a distant God who either does not care enough for us to be involved in our struggles, or one who cares but is powerless to help or heal anybody. Those are the two options open to us and I will opt for the first anytime.

One question I anticipate you may have for me is this: If I believe my volunteer is doing the right thing and the inmate in the Kairos prayer meeting hasn't done anything wrong, why then don't I pray like that? As a matter of fact, I do, but usually not in public. I am from the old school. Back in the day in 1972, early in my Christian journey, it was impressed upon me that it was not Jesus's one-line public prayer or command that got Him victory in ministry but that Jesus often spent a whole night or an extended amount of time alone in prayer before any major events, such as choosing His 12 Disciples, (Luke 6:12, 13). If Jesus, the Son of God, valued and depended that much on prayer for His endless successes, I should not expect a free pass from God. As I mentioned earlier, over a century ago, S.D. Gordon, widely traveled speaker and prolific author of more than 25 devotional books in the early 1900s said, "The real victory in all service is won beforehand in prayer. Service is merely gathering up the results." I believe that with all my heart and that's why I do all my praying and binding and loosening in the closet. In public, I give thanks to God for what He's poised to do, and I open my eyes to see what God is doing and how He has answered my prayers. The only time you can hear me "bind and loose" in public is when I sense a sudden intrusion or presence of satanic forces during the service. Thankfully, this is rare, because the Spirit of the risen Christ is alive in me, as well as in other believers present, and He is also present in the space where two or three are gathered in His name, and that presence of the Spirit of Christ is paralyzing, sanitizing and repellant to the evil one. I may be wrong, but praying long prayers in public doesn't sit well with me except for intercessory and lamenting prayers in times of national crises.

From my experience, long prayer in public suggests one of many things to me: First, that the person has something to prove, and the flowery church language, extra Scripture quotations and verbiage of prayer is one way to achieve that—to prove themselves to the people. When you think of it, that's more like praying for public approval than to God. Some preaching goes this way, too. The pastor knows the right phraseology and verbiage that will get the people's approval and applause. That way, preaching becomes entertaining than speaking forth for God. Two, that the person hasn't really had a private, intimate prayer with God in closet; he is trying to make up for that deficiency when called upon to pray in public. At least for me, my long prayer in public becomes a makeup prayer for my prayerlessness in the closet. Third, sometimes it is due to lack of faith in God that God will hear and answer the prayer. So, the long-winded, rigmarole prayer—which is really preaching a sermon to God—is an attempt to convince God (or convince himself). Lastly, for many people, prayer is rote; it comes from a practiced routine than conscious and intentional petition to a living God. What do I mean? This is what I mean: If you wake up some people at 3 in the morning and ask them to pray, they will say almost the same prayer, verbatim, that they had said when called upon to pray at 3 pm of the day before regardless of the difference in situation. I wouldn't say it is memorized prayer, maybe mechanical praying.

While on the topic of prayer, I may safely say that prayer is everything to Nigerian Christians, and, maybe to Christians in the Third World countries in general, because they can hardly rely on their government, bank, insurance, the Police, fire department, or hospital system in times of disasters and tragedies. God—or prayer—becomes their first, the next, the last, and the only resort, in trouble. Although we make a joke of it as Nigerian pastors, believe it or not, it is painfully and pathetically true that in Nigeria and other African countries, the telephone number you dial during emergencies is not 911 as in the US, or 112 as in Europe, or 999 as in the UK. The telephone number you dial to heaven is Jeremiah 33:3 or Matthew 7:7 or Psalm 50:15. Those are our emergency numbers. Blessed are you if you have them on

speed dial. Happily, the numbers are never busy. (For the record, in Lagos, Nigeria, the numbers for ambulance, fire and police emergencies are 112 and 767. The questions are: how many Nigerians or Lagosians are aware of these numbers? How many use them? How many trust them? And, how effective are they in an emergency? Let's say the caller overcomes his phone carrier's network problems and gets through, how soon will help reach him in the present state of bad roads, incessant, meaningless and unpredictable traffic jams?). Here goes the hotline in Nigeria:

“Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.” “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.” (Jer. 33:3; Matt. 7:7; Psa. 50:15).

All that said about prayer and efficacy of prayer notwithstanding, if we are not careful we can easily make a religion out of prayer or our prayer life. Sounds self-contradicting or paradoxical, doesn't it? I'll explain. It's that prayer (and many days of fasting) may easily become the end in itself, and not the means to an end. We forget that it is not our prayer (and many days of fasting) that brings us the help; it is God who answers our prayer that sends the help. It's a subtle but dangerous shift in the object (or focal point) of worship. The panacea becomes the prayer and fasting while God becomes the subtheme. There are many indigenous churches and denominations whose doctrines and practices revolve around, and are based entirely on prayer and the power of prayer and fasting. For those churches and ministries, prayer is in the driver's seat while God takes the passenger seat. They have inadvertently deified (or made god of) prayer and fasting. In other words, prayer and fasting have become the twosome deity trusted to deliver answers to prayer.

Here in America, believe it or not, in many contemporary Evangelical or Pentecostal churches today, many members love “the music, the praise and worship” more than they love the God, to whom they claim to sing the praise and worship songs. The pendulum swings back and forth and the church vacillates from one that is anthropocentric (having humankind as the central

or most important, needing or deserving attention and ministry) to one that is Theocentric (having God as a central focus, most important, needing or deserving attention and ministry). The state of a local church, or the leadership of the church, at any point in time is easily discernible if you use the applause test. Simply ask: For whose applause is this happening in the church right now—for God and the heavenly audience, or for the members and those watching online? Your answer to the applause question portrays the devotion and loyalty of those performing in the church. Remember Jesus' warning in Matthew 6:1-4, "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven... But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly" (vv. 1, 3, 4).

I am not asking you to be hypercritical; please go with the flow but be aware of the trend. To be sure, many things are done in the name of Christ that are not Christ honoring; and many projects are funded under the guise of extending God's kingdom that are smokescreens for building a human empire. Balancing professionalism and ministry in the church is a must, yet, it is not easy to achieve, and does not happen haphazardly without intentionality. The May 12th devotional I read in "My Utmost for His Highest," (Grad Edition) by Oswald Chambers, probably says it best. It reads, "Your god may be your little Christian habit, the habit of prayer at stated times, or the habit of Bible reading. Watch how your Father will upset those times if you begin to worship your habit instead of what the habit symbolizes—I can't do that just now, I'm praying; it is my hour with God. No, it is your hour with your habit."

In some instances, this misplaced devotion manifests in some Christians when their study of the Bible, reverence and devotion to the Bible overshadows the person's devotion to the God of the Bible. Sadly, they have become worshippers of the Bible. If it is acceptable that a simple definition of an idol or a little "god" is "anything—person, practice, philosophy, ism, principle, tangible or intangible—that replaces God, or takes the number 1 place of

attention in your heart, love and devotion before God,” then I can boldly say that those people may have inadvertently idolized (or made a little “god” out of) the Bible. The first of the Ten Commandments is, “You shall have no other gods before Me,” (Exo. 20:2).

We can be born again, have a great body of doctrines, and know God without giving God our heart and devotion. The result is a full head but an empty heart, spewing rules from every corner of the mouth with a loveless heart. Some Evangelicals need to understand that fighting for God—or fighting a perceived God’s cause—is not the same as loving God. With God, the end does not justify the means, especially if the means entails a loveless, hateful path. We cannot fight in the name of God while at the same time defaming the name of God who is love. The best way to fight God’s battle is to love God passionately and love human beings created in God’s image with the same fervency. Any other way is like winning pockets of skirmishes in exchange for losing the big war, or, as C. S. Lewis put it, “Put first things first and second things are thrown in. Put second things first and you lose both first and second things.”

Our prayer life might start as an act of obedience or an obligation, but it should progress from obligation to fellowship and communion with the Father, from “have to” to “want to,” and from “want to” to “love to, and cannot do without,” from seeking God’s gifts to pursuing God, the Giver. The Israelites were mandated to appear before God and offer certain sacrifices at specific times and seasons in the yearly calendar. That was an obligation. Essentially, prayer is about relationship. It’s about family conversation when the child looks up and says, “Our Father who is in heaven.” It can take the form of a dialogue, such as between Father-child, Master-servant, King-subject, and Creator-creation.

Do you recall at the beginning I told you to keep this saying in mind, “Don’t throw away the baby with the bath water”? The Apostle Paul put the same sentiment across in a couplet of exhortations:

19Do not quench the Spirit. 20Do not despise prophecies. 21Test all things; hold fast what is good. 22Abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thess.

5:19-22).

Paul says, don't "quench the Spirit," don't "despise prophecies," "test all things." In other words, be open-minded; don't close your mind to others and their faith practices just because your experience is different from theirs. Our faith is big enough to accommodate authentic different expressions. There are excesses and there are phony preachers and false prophets. Open your eyes wide; beware; be cautious but not paranoid. Otherwise, you'll be guilty of throwing away the good with the bad or the baby with the bath water.

What do we do with a dead dog? We bury it out of sight. Change the letters around in the word dog and you get god. What should we do with a dead god? I suggest burying it out of sight. Happily, we serve a risen, resurrected, living Savior. We serve the living God and our faith is a living faith. That's why we dare to believe that God can do the humanly impossible—and He can do it through us, through you and me. We dare believe that God is working in us "both to will and to do for His good pleasure," (Phil. 2:13). We dare believe that "with God all things are possible," (Mark 10:27d), "all things are possible to him who believes," (Mark 9:23c). Lastly, we dare believe that we serve a God and Savior "who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen," (Eph. 3:20, 21).

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION/ MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 12

1. How do the 4 Old Testament and 1 New Testament passages help our understanding of spiritual warfare?
2. How would you explain or make sense of the sentence: "We are not fighting for victory; we are fighting from victory"? Give one or two scriptures to support your answer.
3. Under which two conditions does Satan do his best work and why?
4. From your reading of 1) Jesus' prayer for His disciples in John 17, the model prayer Jesus taught His disciples in Matthew 6:9-13, and

- 3) the parables of the kingdom Jesus taught in Matthew 13, is Satan a figurative or metaphorical figure or a real spirit being in Jesus' mind? Explain this in the light of pictorial depictions of Satan in literature today.
5. Name some problems in the society that are traceable to Satan's half-truth and half lie about the nature of the subject. Also, name some problems among teenagers that are traceable to Satan's half-truth and half lie about the nature of the topic.
 6. Explain the concept of our dual nature of material and immaterial, and/or of our tripartite nature of spirit, soul, and body—1 Thessalonians 5:23. Is this also true of animals and home pets like dogs and cats?
 7. How do you understand this sentence: "Properly understood, we are not human beings having a spiritual experience; rather, we are spirit beings having a human experience"?
 8. How do we overrate or overestimate Satan? How do we underrate or underestimate him? What mindset predisposes us to become prey to Satan's tricks? What makes us easily play into his hands or fall into his traps?
 9. After spending three years teaching and mentoring His disciples and after presenting "Himself alive... by many infallible proofs" (Acts 1:3) to them for forty days after His resurrection, why did Jesus still consider them unprepared for the work and why would He command them not to depart Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4)?
 10. What are the two types of power that Christ gives us? Explain each one and show why they are indispensable.
 11. Explain binding and loosening in the Jewish context.
 12. What did Jesus mean when He said, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven," (Matthew 16:19)?

13. How does understanding “binding and loosing,” or Jesus’ delegated authority validate the apostle’s decisions and governance of the church and how does that also endorse the non-red-letter portions of the New Testament as equally sanctioned by Christ?
14. How would you answer this question: When you read the papers, or listen to the news, or hear what’s happening in your neighborhood, what stirs up your holy anger? What troubles your spirit?
15. Why is intercession or spiritual warfare almost impossible without a deep sense or intense feeling of “holy discontent” or dissatisfaction with the status quo?
16. Explain: “It is a person who is under authority that can exercise authority”?
17. Explain why the 7 sons of Sceva, the Jewish high priest (Acts 19:11-17) were unable to cast out demons in a demon-possessed person even though they used the name of Jesus and prayer formula that Paul used to cast out devils.
18. Can we exercise or communicate authority in school or workplace without using words—spoken or written? Is authority always expressed verbally? Explain your answer.
19. Explain why the concept of binding and loosing cannot be used to justify the “claim and receive” gospel and cannot be equated with the open-ended “I declare and decree” prayer language.
20. How can Christians today reverse St. Thomas Aquinas’s indictment that while we cannot say “Silver and gold have I not,” like the early apostles, neither can we also say, “Rise up and walk” to the cripple? What will need to happen for the modern church to regain the spiritual power possessed by the early apostles?
21. Name 5 of the 16 weapons of our warfare and mention why you selected those 5.
22. What do you think of the chaplain’s opinion that most long prayers in public could be for show, to compensate for a lack in closet prayer, lack of faith, or purely mechanical, rote? Explain why you

agree or disagree with his analysis.

23. What if S.D. Gordon were right on point when he said, “The real victory in all service is won beforehand in prayer. Service is merely gathering up the results.” How could that understanding help to improve our ministries?
24. How do you understand the author’s caution that without care and diligent attention, we may turn our prayer and fasting into our religion, to the deity we trust for answers, or the end in itself, or what Oswald Chambers referred to as becoming devoted to the habit of prayer than intimacy with God?
25. The author writes, “Here in America, believe it or not, in many contemporary Evangelical or Pentecostal churches today, many members love “the music, the praise and worship” more than they love the God, to whom they claim to sing the praise and worship songs.” How could this observation be true? Discuss if it is true or not, and the implications of its being true or false.

The Three Enemies of the Christian²⁹

Classical spiritual theology delineates three basic enemies of our spiritual life. For centuries, these have been tagged the “three enemies of the soul.” They are the world, the flesh, and the devil. As the sources of temptation, they are viewed as the “unholy trinity” in opposition to the Trinity.

Some have seen these three enemies reflected in the temptations of Jesus in the desert in Matthew chapter 4. The temptation 1) to tempt God by casting Himself off the pinnacle is the lure of the world; 2) to turn stones into bread is the allurement of the flesh; and 3) to worship Satan is blatantly the devil unmasked. The root of this triad is also seen in Jesus’ parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-20). Satan is represented by the birds which ate up the seed that fell by the wayside, thus preventing any chance of germination or growth; the seeds that fell on shallow and rocky soil and which growth couldn’t thrive represent the weakness of the flesh; and the seed that fell among thorns and weeds and was choked represents “the cares of the world and the lure of wealth” (Mark 4:15-17).

As he left for the day, the employee of a store wheeled out a small carton in a wheelbarrow. The security guard stopped him and examined the carton. It contained sawdust. The employee explained that the sawdust would be thrown away into the dumpster, he was just helping to reduce the burden. He needed the sawdust for a work in his home. The following day, again, on his

29. This is more like an afterword, because I thought it would be very remiss of me to discuss spiritual warfare and not mention “the three enemies of the soul.”

This chapter, “The Three Enemies of the Christian” was titled AN EXTENDED STUDY AND MEDITATION MATERIAL DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN, copied and mailed to inmates on the Protestant community call out in July 2020 during the Covid-19 lockdown when gatherings and congregational worship services were not advisable or permitted.

way out he wheeled out a small carton containing sawdust in a wheelbarrow. Again, the same security guard stopped him, inspected the carton—it was filled with sawdust. The employee gave the same explanation that he needed the sawdust for a work in his home. The third day, same routine. This continued for seven days. On day 7, the security guard then said, “I know you are stealing something, I just don’t know what. I have poured out the sawdust again and again and found nothing hidden in the carton. But my hunch tells me you are stealing something. If you tell me what you are stealing, I will not report it; I will let you go. I swear.” He crossed his heart. The employee then whispered, “Wheelbarrows.”

He had been stealing wheelbarrows—the big thing—but the security guard was focused on the small carton of sawdust in the wheelbarrow. The small carton of sawdust was the decoy. It is important for us to be engaged in the right battle, the right fight, and not be distracted by the decoy that we spend our energies pursuing the wrong things. Some of our fights are futile, because they focus on the minor. We may win the battle and lose the war. It behooves us to ask, “How is this going to impact (or help) my mission in life? Is this a distraction (decoy, enemy’s ploy, red herring) or a necessary fight? Who or what is the real enemy I need to fight here?” A successful warrior understands the warfare he’s engaged in, studies the wiles and strategies of his opponent, and masters the weapons he needs to win the war.

This much we know: God does not tempt us to sin as the Bible clearly states in James 1:13. “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.” On the contrary, God helps us in times of temptation as we read in 1 Corinthians 10:13. “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” To be successful in any sports, combat, or warfare one must not only improve one’s skills, stamina and ability but as well learn the enemy’s or opponent’s tactics and strengths. We are encouraged to “fight the good fight of faith,” (1 Tim. 6:12), “be strong...

put on the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:10, 11) and not be ignorant of the wiles, the schemes and strategies of Satan, the enemy of our souls. “Lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices” (2 Cor. 2:11). For a starter, the devil knows our weak points and specializes in tempting us in those areas. If you’ve never touched alcohol or abused drugs but have struggled with lusts and sensuality, the devil is not going to tempt you with drugs or alcohol, but you can be sure to expect many unforeseen, unforeseeable and uncomfortable tempting scenarios in the area of sensuality, unless you’ve learned to build your defenses and boundaries in that area well in advance.

I come from an African background where every problem is the handiwork of the enemy or some enemies. Most times when Africans pray against the enemy, they not only have the devil in mind but can as well picture the faces of some “wicked” men, women or witches out to get them. For some reasons, from the onset of my Christian faith I couldn’t subscribe to this. First, without disregarding the facts of the occult or possibility of witches out to get me, I wanted to believe—and I did believe—that “greater is He who is in me than the devil in the world.” Second, even if I knew some were actively plotting my downfall, I was more prone to switch quickly to what Jesus said about blessing and praying for your enemies in the Sermon on the Mount than wishing ill on them (Matthew 5-7). Lastly, if I was honest with myself, I was aware that I was my own worst and number 1 enemy, not the devil. If I am to be true to my conscience, I wouldn’t and I couldn’t blame the devil or anyone else for my carelessness, or anything resulting from my laziness, procrastination, complacency, laxity, passivity, negativity, self-doubt, naiveté, and other vices I would like to take responsibility for rather than pointing fingers at the devil or shifting blame on other people.

We have a saying in my (Yoruba) language: “It is the enemy within that opens the door to the enemy without;” or “if the enemy on the inside does not kill you, the enemy outside is powerless to harm you.” However strong the enemies outside—the world and the devil—might be in strength and strategy, if the enemy within—the flesh—is put under check and in control,

little harm will come from outside forces. The world and the devil tempt us from without, but the flesh rebels from within. Satan uses the allurements of the world and the appeal of the flesh to try to get us to do what God forbids. If we master or put in check the enemy within—the flesh—that victory will take care of the enemy outside.

The Three Enemies of the Soul

1. The devil—the enemy from without; intrusive, intruding; invader, invading (like a hostile army or bully)

Much has been written already about Satan in the previous chapter. Suffice to mention here that the name Satan literally means “slanderer” or “accuser.” I tagged him the intrusive or intruding outside enemy. Intrusive is defined as “causing disruption or annoyance through being unwelcome or uninvited; someone or something that invades personal space, that becomes too involved or that comes too close without being invited.” Doesn’t that so well describe the devil? Satan hates things that are holy. He specializes in tricking humans—beginning with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden—into following him with false promises that lead humans away from God’s plans and purposes for them. Intruding is defined as, “to put oneself deliberately into a place or situation where one is unwelcome or uninvited; to thrust oneself in without invitation, permission, or welcome; to thrust or force in or upon someone or something especially without permission, welcome, or fitness.” How definitive of Satan. Invading is defined as “enter (a person, place, situation, or sphere of activity) in large numbers, especially with intrusive effect.” The devil is that intruder (bully or invading hostile army) who seeks to subjugate or occupy by force. The apostle Peter in 1 Peter 5:8, 9, has some strong words of warning and encouragement about our archenemy:

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.

Think on this scenario: Your concerned Grandpa put a sword in your

hand, a shield in the other hand, fitted you with a breastplate, put a helmet on your head, strapped some heavy boots on your feet... and you asked, "Grandpa, what's going on?" How naïve! What else could be going on? There's a war, an ongoing battle! You are in warfare. Life is warfare, and very much so the Christian life. That's why God provides us with "the full armor of God," (Eph. 6:11, 13). Before we came to Christ, we were under the devil's and this world's control. We were not in any serious attack from the enemy, because the devil would not fight against those who are under his purview—because he already has them. The scripture says, "But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them" (2 Cor. 4:3, 4). That's you and me before we came to Christ. That's the identity of the unbelievers of this age.

After God "has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love" (Col. 1:13), we come under Satan's attack. We are no longer under the devil's domain. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others" (Eph. 2:1-3). Apostle John wrote, "We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one" (1 Jn. 5:19). Happily, we are not alone. We are safe. We have help. We "are kept by the power of God," (1 Pet. 1:5). James says, "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (Jam. 4:7). Jesus promised,

And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one" (Jn. 10:28-30).

Today, as in the days of the Apostles, Satan has his own synagogues and churches (Rev. 2:9); he has his own gospel (Gal. 1:6); he has his own ministers (2 Cor. 11:14, 15); he has his own doctrine (1 Tim. 4:1); and his own communion service (1 Cor. 10:21). In Ephesians 6:10-18, apostle Paul describes the armor of God for the Christian. He commands, “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:10, 11; NASB). In the next verse, he reminds us that our struggle or fight is not against human beings, even if they are visibly the agents of Satan. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (6:12; NASB).

A veteran in spiritual warfare, the Apostle Paul warns and reminds us, and especially redirects our attention to the real enemy we wrestle or struggle against. “Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places,” (Eph. 6:10-12). We fight an unseen enemy who manifests and wages the war using people—family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and the world system—as his tools. It will be a great distraction and a fall into the traps of the enemy if we direct our fights against these tools the enemy is using—family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and the world system. Such warfare strategy on our part is like fighting the symptoms of a disease rather than the root cause of the ailment; or attempting to destroy a weed by cutting off the foliage and branches of the weed rather than uprooting the weed altogether from our lawn. In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul continues on the same line, writing, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses,” (10:3, 4; NASB).

In John 10:10 Jesus showed the sharp contrast between Himself, the Good

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Shepherd who “gives His life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11) and the hirelings who were not the shepherds, did not own the sheep and had no commitment than personal gains, (Jn. 10:12). Those hirelings were the false leaders and fake shepherds whose motive only was to bleed and fleece the sheep rather than provide and protect. Jesus said, “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” In the immediate context (of the discourses in John chapters 9 and 10), the “thief” Jesus was referring to would, more appropriately, be the hypocritical Pharisees, Sadducees and other Jewish religious leaders who were taking advantage of the sheep. Jesus said their true mission was “to steal, and to kill, and to destroy” God’s people. (Sadly, we still have many “church leaders” today camouflaging as helpers while stealing, killing, and destroying God’s flock.) Without doubt, this is also the three-fold mission of Satan, to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. Satan, the ultimate thief and robber, ambushes, and attacks Christians to rob us of our joy and peace, kill our vision and passion, and destroy our reputation, marriage, home, and ministry.

The devil has many tools in his arsenal. I will briefly mention 7. Some of them may not be apparent as tools of the devil but when you consider that the enemy is the master of disguise (2 Cor. 11:13-15), you know anything is possible. “And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms [masquerades; NIV] himself into an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). We might as well consider disguise as the eighth and possibly the crown tool of Satan, because Satan works best when he’s undetected as the source or mastermind of a problem. According to Apostle Paul, Satan “take[s] advantage of us” when we are “ignorant of his devices” (2 Cor. 2:11).

Seven tools in the devil’s arsenal are 1) doubt (or disbelief), 2) discouragement (or despair), 3) deception (or lies), 4) damnation (or condemnation), 5) discord (or disunity), 6) dread (or irrational fears) and 7) death (or losses and deprivation). In the Garden of Eden Satan used his tool of doubt when he suggested to Eve, “Has God said...”? That’s urging Eve to question God’s word by sowing the seed of doubt in Eve. The devil tried the same on Jesus

but failed when he told Jesus, “If you are the Son of God...” seeking Jesus to doubt or question His identity. The weapon of discouragement is seen in the devil’s whisper of negative thoughts and negative words from self, family or even church members. Discouraging whispers such as, “You’ll never amount to anything, just like your deadbeat dad,” “You can’t figure it out; you can’t do anything successfully,” “I’ve done it again; I’m such a failure!” “Why bother; just quit,” etc. Satan’s deception, as “a liar and the father of it” (Jn. 8:44; see also Rev. 12:9) is seen in many TV commercials spewing half-truths and incomplete information, in divorce courtrooms and DWI/DUI convictions, in rehab centers for divers addictions, and in many dangerous cults and religions. His damnation tool manifests in his name, “the accuser” or adversary. He’s the one who accuses and seeks to bring us into condemnation by bringing our past messes into our consciousness and suggesting that God has not forgiven us because we cannot be cleansed and forgiven of those messes. But, in Christ, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” (Rom. 8:1; NIV).

In Proverbs 6:16-19, the writer lists seven sins that the Lord hates; the seventh amongst them, “one who sows discord among brethren” (6:19b). The “one who sows discord among brethren” is an agent of the devil. In Matthew 16:23, Jesus turned to Peter and sharply rebuked him saying, “Get behind Me, Satan,” because at that point Peter had become an agent of Satan. From the account of Job’s testing and the tragedies and misfortunes that followed at the hand of the devil when God gave Satan a limited permission to attack Job, we know that the devil can use people, circumstances and elements of nature to carry out his works. In Job’s case the devil used elements of weather—fire and wind—and human agents, the Sabeans and Chaldeans (Job 1:8-19) in his attempt to destroy Job’s credibility. Today, the devil sows the seed of discord in homes, families, churches, and workplaces through gossip, back-biting, and rumor mongering. In Satan’s own words, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it,” (Job 1:7), using family and friends as his tools, the enemy is busy promoting and spreading baseless rumors and unfounded accusations against leaders and coworkers. Walking

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“about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 1:8), the devil sometimes disguises as a concerned friend and third ear for your safety. Unsuspectingly, the enemy can easily bait you with reports such as, “When you and Jones are together, you think he likes you, because he laughs with you and agrees with you, but you will be shocked to hear what he thinks of you and what he says of you behind your back.” It’s a bait of the enemy, which, if you take it, will lead only to a can of worms. King Solomon warned, “A perverse man sows strife, And a whisperer separates the best of friends” (Prov. 16:28).

Dread or irrational fear or phobia: “I was afraid... and I hid myself” (Gen. 3:9) was the pathetic admission of one of the consequences of Adam’s sin. The Bible says, “God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7). Fear paralyzes and immobilizes you. Even when you have all you need to win, fear incapacitates you and you lose. Fear counteracts faith, because fear and faith cannot cohabitate. One of the first missiles the enemy fires is fear, because fear will open the door to a host of other negative emotions, such as anxiety, panic, doubt, insecurity, distrust, anger, hatred, etc. If you are in good health and have plenty of money, fear will not let you enjoy them and live in peace from constant worry that something terrible may soon happen that will rob you of your health and dissipate your investments. If you are in poor health and impoverished, fear and its cousin, worry, will keep you on edge that the worse is just around the corner and you’re likely going to die a destitute from a horrible sickness. So, either way, in plenty or want, fear worsens the case and makes you a loser.

Death (and losses and acute deprivation): Some losses in life are death-blows to a portion of our life and wellbeing and deprivation, at some levels, is slow death. Contrary to Old Testament understanding, this is not “the land of the living” (Psa. 27:13; 116:9) but the land of the dying. Physical death is the lot, the inescapable appointment, of everyone (Heb. 9:27). There are senseless deaths and some deaths that are the works of the enemy, such as murder, homicide, suicide, assassination, lynching, dying from starvation, torment, persecution and martyrdom. The Bible says that death is the last

enemy that shall be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26). We know for certain that Satan was behind the sudden and untimely deaths of Job's 7 children and other losses Job suffered. Without mincing words, Judas is culpable for his betrayal, but the Bible also points out that he was instigated by the devil. "And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him [Jesus]... Now after the piece of bread, Satan entered him [Judas]" (Jn. 13:2, 27a). The good news is that whatever the cause of death to a Christian, even if gruesome and savage, death is the doorway to glory (Heb. 2:14, 15; 1 Cor. 15:54-58). Our Master enjoined us not to "fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both the soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

2. The World—the enemy without; the outside enemy alluring, enticing, and baiting

I tagged this enemy an outside enemy, alluring, charming and enticing. I initially wanted to define the world, but after a second thought I changed my mind. I concluded that every sincere Christian knows what "the world" or "worldliness" means to him or her. Every child of God filled with the Holy Spirit can best define and describe the temptations and allurements of the world that the enemy uses against him to cool and dampen his affection for godly things and distract his devotion to Christ. The tools the world uses may necessarily not be sinful in themselves, but they are not helpful for spiritual development. Possibly because they are the result of, or consequently lead to, misplaced priority, or a slippery slope and to what that may eventually lead. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that some things that are not sinful may be weights that weigh us down, overburden us and impede our resolve and speed in our Christian race. The writer implores us to "lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1b). The world is anything that dims our witness for Christ, blurs our vision of heavenly and eternal things. The world is anything whatsoever that the world system supplies that now serves as the (poor) substitute for our deepest needs which only a relationship with our

Maker can provide satisfactorily. Hence, Jesus warns, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:36, 37). To Jesus, the value of a human soul is more precious than the entire world.

As Christians, we are in the world but not of the world. We have dual citizenship—we are citizens of an earthly country (or kingdom) and bona fide citizens of an eternal, heavenly kingdom of God. We live in the world and we are in constant touch with the world through our five senses. Yet, the world’s system is against our highest calling. The world is insidious, crafty, captivating, enticing, and dangerous, because the enemy of our souls is running the system of the world. In 1 Peter 2:11, the apostle, reminding us of a proper understanding of our relationship to the world, admonishes, “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.” Peter says we are “sojourners,” “pilgrims,” “temporary residents” or “aliens” in this world. We are in the world but not of it. And the Apostle Paul wrote, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,” (Phil. 3:20; also Heb. 11:13).

In plain language and very clear terms Jesus says, “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (Jn. 15:18, 19). The world hates us because we take a stand for Christ and His gospel. For this reason, the Apostle Paul pleads with and enjoins Christians, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:1, 2). James writes, “friendship with the world is enmity with God” (Jam. 4:4). We cannot be loyal to both Christ and the world system. In that classical passage on our relationship to the world, John writes,

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the

world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever” (1 Jn. 2:15-17).

3. The flesh—the enemy within; the inside enemy, rebelling, impulsive and compulsive

I tagged it the enemy on the inside, full of rebellion, and acting on impulse and basic instinct without thinking it through, just like animals live by instinct. Impulsive is defined as “acting or done without forethought.” That’s the flesh. The flesh acts on impulse and basic natural instincts without employing sound judgment and wisdom or considering the long-term effects. Like a child, the flesh thinks only in the now, the pleasure now, not processing the consequences. Compulsive is defined as “resulting from or relating to an irresistible urge, especially one that is against one’s conscious wishes.” Apostle Paul states this principle of “irresistible urge” best in Romans 7:14-25. Rebelling is defined as “rise in opposition or armed resistance to an established government or ruler.” That “established government or ruler” is God and His kingdom. Little wonder Jesus said, “The spirit is indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak,” (Matt. 26:41). According to the Bible, “flesh” refers to the physical nature of human beings. When we reference someone that is living for the flesh, we simply mean a person that lives according to one’s desires, lives by a pure, perhaps instinctive impulse, without regard to the morality of such a desire or desires.

The apostle Paul, writing to Christians penned some bone-chilling character flaws found in Galatians 5:19-21, Colossians 3:5-9 and Ephesians 5:3-5. After more than 40 years in ministry, I realized, sadly, that these character flaws—greed, pride, resentment, jealousy, bitterness, unforgiving spirit, sexual immorality, excessive anger, vengeful spirit—are to be found in every local church, every church choir/praise team, every board of deacons, and every association of clergy men and women. Why? It’s because believers are deep in practice but shallow in character. Spiritual maturity has little to do

with age, seminary degree or ordination.

From the Genesis (creation) story, “the Lord God formed a man [Adam] from the dust of the ground [from dirt] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life [a part of God Himself, God’s Spirit] and the man became a living being,” (Gen. 2:7, NIV, insert mine). From that understanding of our being and origin, as someone put it, we are “a queer mixture of dirt and deity;” we are molded clay with divinity embedded into one. There’s a divine part of our being that was never born, had no beginning and is eternal, because it came from God and will return to God; and there’s an earthly part of our being—the house or casing—that will one day return to dust, “for dust you are and to dust you will return,” (Gen. 3:19c). From the fall of man when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and rebelled against God, Adam’s offspring now have a defective heart that’s inclined to sin. For “The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9). Our human nature, the flesh, tends to sin, to go its own way.

As Christians we have two natures—the new life which we received when we accept Christ and the old sinful nature, called the “flesh.” The flesh refers to our fallen self-centered nature; called “the old man” or “the Adamic nature.” The new nature (or new man) is under the control of the Holy Spirit while the old nature is characterized by sinful desires to be its own god and master. The first rebellion was the result of Satan’s lies to Adam and Eve to seek false wisdom and that they “would be like God.” [Say what? They were already made in the image and likeness of God! (Gen. 1:26, 27)]. “Then the serpent [Satan in disguise] said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil,” (Gen. 3:4, 5).

As the devil did tempt Eve with regards to their identity and causing them to have a second thought about their MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD logo, he usually tempts us where it matters most—at the core of our identity, who we truly are and what we have inherited in God. Take the example of Jesus: Jesus, at age 12 publicly declared to His parents who had frantically searched for Him that He wasn’t missing but was in His Father’s [mean-

ing God's] house (Luke 2:41-50). Jesus had no doubt about His identity; He knew who He was. At Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:21, 22), the Holy Spirit descended on Him and God, the Father, spoke of Him from heaven, saying, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." After that heavenly affirmation came the devil, tempting Jesus (Luke 4:1-4), and saying, "If You are the Son of God..." There's no "if" about it! Jesus didn't have to prove anything to the devil; Jesus knew his identity: HE WAS THE SON OF GOD. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve fell for this and doubted their true identity.

As I mentioned earlier, it is the enemy within that opens the door to the enemy without. The flesh is part of our human makeup and it's been weakened by sin and has a constant tendency to sin. The "gospel of responsibility" suggests that before we blame the enemy outside, the devil or the world (blame game originated with Adam and Eve in Eden) we should take responsibility to how we let down our guards or failed to heed the warning light signals on the dashboard of our souls, or disregarded boundaries and overstepped some checks and balances. A boy wore a T-shirt with the caption "The Devil Tempted Me..." on the front, and the words, "...But I Did It!" on the back. That was good theology on a walking billboard. The apostle Paul gave the cure succinctly when he wrote to the Galatians:

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Gal. 5:16-18).

This much we know about God and ourselves/our nature:

1. God cannot sin and God has no nature or tendency to sin. The Holy God is His own standard of holiness. Ironically, God's holiness does not mean distance or aloofness from sinners. The Pharisees had asked Jesus' disciples—since they considered Jesus a holy person, "Why does He eat with sinners?" Jesus did, because a holy and loving God cannot be tainted or contaminated by sin while dining with and embracing sinners.

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2. It is possible for angels and the original Adam to sin and it is possible for them not to sin. Angels and the original Adam had the nature of sin or tendency to sin, but it was a neutral, amoral capacity and they could have remained in the state of innocence had not sin entered the universe. It's all about free will/choices.
3. Angels could sin, if they chose to, and about a third of them chose to when they joined Lucifer's (Satan's) rebellion and were cast out of heaven and are known as demons today.
4. Original Adam could sin, and he chose to when he and Eve disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit. This is what is referred to as the fall of humanity. In Adam, all sinned—Romans 3:23; 5:12.
5. In his fallen state, humanity is not able not to sin. Adam's offspring thereafter inherited a nature of sin and will sin and do sin by nature and by choice. Nobody is condemned to hell today solely because of Adam's sin or the inherited sin nature BUT BECAUSE OF HIS OWN SINFUL CHOICES; especially his refusal to accept God's free offer of eternal salvation by grace through faith in Jesus (Eph. 2:4-10).
6. Once sin came into the world Adam's offspring have a perpetual nature and propensity to continue in sin.
7. The redeemed child of God has regained Adam's (and the angel's) original status; it is possible for him to sin and it is possible for him not to sin. In other words, he could sin if he chooses to but the child of God is no longer under the force of nature to sin, "for sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace," (Romans 6:14; Also, 5:17-21). This by no means suggests sinless perfection but sinning less and less and less and less... until He takes us out of the presence of sin, out of this world of sin.

Galatians 5:16-26

16I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.
17For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and

these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. 18But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

19Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

22But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. 24And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. 26Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Peer-to-peer Mentoring

DAY 14

Discussion Questions

1. If these “three enemies of the soul” were important to our forefathers in the faith in classical spiritual theology (for example, St. Ignatius, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, etc.) are they still relevant to us today? If yes, how often are you reminded of these in the church today? If no, explain.
2. Explain why you agree or disagree about the succinct description of 1) the devil as the enemy on the outside intruding/intrusive, invading; 2) the world as the enemy outside alluring, baiting and enticing, and 3) the flesh as the enemy within rebelling and impulsive.
3. Right now, in what way is 1) the devil intruding into your life or attempting to intrude, 2) the world enticing and baiting you or attempting to suck you into its system, and 3) the flesh goading you in rebellion against God, self and society or urging you to “go with the flow” and act on impulse and shallow reasoning?
4. Name the seven tools in the devil's toolbox. 1) Which of these has

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- the enemy often tried on you? 2) Which has he recently used successfully on you? 3) Why were you such an easy prey in that area? 4) How can you fortify yourself or build defenses in that area so you can overcome such tricks of the enemy? 5) How has the enemy been afflicting you with these not-so-obvious tools: a) discord (disunity in relationships) and b) death (losses and acute deprivation)? 6) Why is it conceivable to consider disguise as the crown tool of the enemy?
5. What is the “world” or “worldliness” to you? How has the system, philosophy and spirit of this world been waging war against your soul?
 6. Hebrews 12:1 presents a dichotomy to us—a two-way of accessing things and events. It tells us that whatever is not a *wing* that causes our spirit to rise and soar is a *weight* that drags us down and keeps us living below our true selves. We do some things—because other people are doing them—but we don’t feel comfortable afterwards. What are those things in your life that are not necessarily sinful events or habits, but you have often been convicted by the Spirit that they are not helpful in promoting your Christian witness, because they dim your lights? What would it mean to your growth in your Christian discipleship if you begin to say “NO” to such things—even if others are doing them and feel comfortable doing them?
 7. The author relates a saying in his (Yoruba) language: “It is the enemy within that opens the door to the enemy without;” or “if the enemy on the inside does not kill you, the enemy outside is powerless to harm you.” Unpack that with regards to the three enemies of the soul—the devil, the world and the flesh. How is conquering the flesh the most probable key to our Christian victory over the world and the devil?
 8. I was willing to admit responsibility “for my carelessness, or anything resulting from my laziness, procrastination, complacency,

- laxity, passivity, negativity, self-doubt, naiveté, and other vices” rather than blame the devil or any other person for my problems. In good conscience, what are those things—those personal vices, personal flaws or weaknesses—that you are willing to accept responsibility for rather than blaming the devil or any other person?
9. Read Ephesians 4:17-32; Romans 12:1, 2; 2 Corinthians 10:3-6; Mark 1:15; Acts 17:30. How can we fortify ourselves that we do not succumb to the weakness of the flesh from what you’ve read?
 10. Recall a passage of Scripture that provides God’s promise and assurance of victory in our battle against 1) the devil, 2) the world and 3) the flesh.
 11. The devil often challenges us on our identity, regarding who we are and what we have, just as he did with Eve and attempted to do with Jesus. In what area is the evil one challenging you or trying to sow doubt in your mind about your identity and inheritance in Christ?
 12. How do you understand how the author concludes the section: “The redeemed child of God has regained Adam’s (and the angel’s) original status; it is possible for him to sin and it is possible for him not to sin. In other words, he could sin if he chooses to but the child of God is no longer under the force of nature to sin, *“for sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace,”* (Romans 6:14; Also, 5:17-21).” Explain.
 13. Read Galatians 5:16-25. If the primary enemy to conquer is the flesh—the old man, the Adamic nature, as the author suggests, what is the *flesh* to you? How do you struggle or wrestle in that area? What’s your plan or strategy for victory in the areas of your weakness?
 14. How true and accurate are these kinds of indictments against the church: “The church has become more worldly and the world more churchy that there’s no telling the difference,” or, “The church is entering the world and the world is entering the church,” or, “The church is becoming more worldly and the world is becoming more

churchy”? Discuss.

15. Blame shifting or the blaming game is as old as the creation of humanity. Adam blamed Eve directly (and indirectly God who gave him Eve) and Eve blamed the serpent (Gen. 3) for tempting her. No doubt you have played (or mastered) this blaming game from childhood—especially if you grew up with siblings. For some, it’s their default button; they are never responsible for anything; they always point the finger to someone else. How have you recently employed or defaulted to this habit? How helpful, if any, is it to your spiritual growth? In the light of this Scripture: *“He who covers his sins will not prosper, But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy”* (Prov. 28:13), why is it important to repent and come clean?

Theme: Biblical Pathway to Overcoming Addictions/ Recovery of Soul

Dear Chaplain,

I am a high school dropout. Drug use, abuse and addiction are in my family. Mother, father, granddad, uncle, cousin, aunt, siblings... you name it, they've been to jail one or more times for drug use, firearms, illegal possession, and sale. I am in my mid-thirties. Believe it or not, I am serving my fourth prison term for drugs. It's all I've known. Drugs lead to nothing good but arrests and incarceration or overdose and sudden, untimely death. We cry when someone dies of overdose, but we all know that it's going to happen again. The question is who of us is going to be next? I've seen it all and I am tired. I don't want to go that route anymore. Somebody in my dorm invited me to your Protestant service and after attending two or three Sunday services I'm beginning to believe that maybe there's hope for me; maybe I can change. I am taking classes to earn my GED before I am released. I am still young and can still make something of my life, God helping me. How do I find a new path and escape before it is too late for me? I can get drugs in jail, but I've not used any for a while. That's not to say I've quit. What do I do when my body craves for drugs? I know it's always a short-lived relief and fleeting high feeling but without that relief the drug provides I'm irritable and miserable most of my life. It's not the business I want to do any more.

Jose, 35-year-old inmate on his 4th bid in jail

I'm thankful that someone in your dorm invited you to our service and that you've found it uplifting. It is one thing to be invited; it is another thing to respond positively and to keep coming, like you have done. I took up this

position of prison chaplaincy, because I thought I could make a difference in someone's life. My first series of Bible studies and emphasis was on change—biblical change, on moving ahead in another direction that's different from your past and present situations. Truth be told, I soon found out that some inmates, including those who regularly attended religious services, were not interested in changing their behavior or criminal lifestyle. This was disappointing, to say the least.

Disappointing and frustrating but not devastating because I didn't take this job for the purpose of wanting to save everybody, that's not possible. Nobody can save the world. I didn't take the job believing I could save anybody, because I can't save anyone. I can't even save myself. I am not the Savior; Jesus is. I also need a Savior. I took the job in the hope that if I intimately and passionately follow the Great Shepherd of our souls, I might be the lead sheep that becomes the North Star for strayed and straying sheep to find their way back to the fold and into the Master's embrace. That's why I'm glad when I meet someone like you seeking to move on in a new direction.

A Young Man Named Whyme³⁰

Having been on this job as Protestant chaplain for close to a decade, I can tell you that for many inmates, their story reads like the story of a young man named Whyme. Unable to cope with the rising cost of living and hoping for a new start in a new environment, Whyme's parents relocated from Bottomless city and resettled in the Town of Hassle and Hustle, in a county with little or no prospects. This place is where the down and out of society and those who've fallen on hard times often resort to find solace and refuge. While house rent is low, the downside of living in the Town of Hassle and Hustle is the high rate of crime, joblessness, drug abuse, alcoholism, gangs, gunfights, poor roads, and failing schools. The family lives on Number 4 Bleak Lane. Whyme's father works for Hand-to-Mouth agency; his mother is self-employed. She runs a home-based business called ISTOFIM (fancy term for

30. The first Whyme story is a corrupt version of a true story from Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, NY while the second Whyme story, untainted in its form, is from Rochester, NY.

“I’m-Still-Trying-to-Find-Myself”).

Both Whyme and his kid brother, Blooper, attend the WALO (short term for “We-Are-the-Lost-Ones”) middle school at the corners of Trapped Street and Doomed Avenue. Blooper is more focused in his schoolwork and is likely to graduate and continue his education in There’s Hope High School in another zip code. Blooper’s dream is to be able to one day attend college, which will make him the first in the family to graduate from both high school and college. Whyme, on the other hand, has lost interest in education. When he does not cut school all he does in the classroom is play games on his cell phone. Becoming a school dropout doesn’t sound too bad, because his parents and many of his friends are middle or high school dropouts. He believes he is just wasting his time and that he isn’t learning anything in school. As soon as he turned 16, against his parents’ wishes, he dropped out of school to find a job, but he’s finding it extremely hard to get a job. For his age, every prospective employer, even for the job of bagging groceries, requires from him a proof that he’s either in school or has been endorsed for employment by a youth agency. Presently, he’s not making big money selling drugs, but he’s hoping to be fully trusted and absorbed into the business soon.

The members of IJD (code name for “It’s-Jail-or-Death”) neighborhood gang are the only people who understand Whyme and can feel his pain and that’s why they are his new family on the streets. The IJD gang is more prominent than the LD (street term for “Living-the-Dream”) gang on the other end of the street. It gives Whyme a sense of pride to be an IJDite. They call the LD gang a bunch of Losers with uppercase L, because the LDites usually come short anytime the two rival gangs clash in a street fight. Whyme is also like Blooper’s guardian angel, which gives him joy, because his association in the gang keeps anyone in IJD and LD from harming Blooper, who’s not into any gang. So, when Whyme wakes up in the morning he looks forward to nothing other than to hobnob around Church Street bodega, make some clandestine drug delivery for some change, or roam the street with his fellow IJDite gang members.

Whyme’s mother knows his son deals in drugs, does not openly encourage

it, saying it leads only to jail or death. Because she knows the only source of Whyme's income comes from drug deals his mother will not accept any money directly from Whyme. Her deadbeat husband, enmeshed in a vicious cycle of friends' unpaid loans, credit card debts, joblessness, alcohol addiction and loss of employment, can hardly support his family. They live under a constant threat of possible eviction or lease termination. Whyme, knowing the family's dire needs, will put some money in places his mother will find it and, though unhappy about it, she will use the money to buy groceries. This breadwinner status, which may abruptly end in some unpleasant ways, is the sacrifice Whyme is willing to make for his family. It is not what either Whyme or his mother want, but it is the reality they live.

Another 20-year old Whyme who's been beset by several deaths in the family, mostly through homicides, while incarcerated told me he'd been on the streets by himself since childhood. His grandmother is the one he calls mother, and she's the person raising him. He had no clue as to who his daddy is or was—dead or alive. Whenever I tried to follow his train of thoughts and understand his family relationships, he would interject that his family was very complicated; meaning that it would be difficult for me to understand how the dots were connected. His mother has been on drugs and alcohol and out of her mind, unable to help herself or any child, for all the time he could remember. He's in jail for robbery and possession of firearms. He told me he'd always had a gun and he'd been in a gang. He had completed his GED in a county jail and has been undergoing vocational training in our jail. He lamented why people abandoned him and had turned away from him while he's in jail.

He said, "Nobody told me I was a bad person, or that what I was doing was wrong when I was giving them money. They knew I was selling drugs, robbing people, was a gang member and had a gun; they never criticized me for any of those, because I was supporting them. Now they're saying I'm a bad person and they don't want to have anything to do with me. How can they turn against me like that? I wasn't a horrible person then when I was useful to them. Now, I am alone in jail, alone in the world. All the people I called

my cousins and half-brothers are dead. I couldn't even attend their funerals or view them in the caskets because of the Covid-19. That means I will never see them again. It's like they just disappeared. I can't help it, but it's not fair. My mother, that's my grandma, is the only person I speak with. She was the one who told me my brother got killed; she didn't tell me the story, because she didn't know the details. That's not really one of her grandchildren. He's from my father's side, but my mother knew we were close. My family is very complicated. People are just dying. They gave me two days off program, but I didn't go today. I don't care what they do to me for not showing up. Two days are not enough for me. I have no energy for anything. I can't think straight or focus on anything. I am losing my mind. I don't want to have anything to do with anybody in my dorm or vocational school. I just stay in my cube and try to read my Bible, but it is not working. I've not been going to chow. I've been smoking all day. I'm really messed up. That's why I said I must see a chaplain..."

Does my first or second Whyme's story sound familiar to anything you've heard or anyone you know? Believe it or not, it is for people like Whyme that Jesus died to redeem and transform. It is for those who have been in Whyme's shoes that we have a message to preach. We preach Christ as Savior, Redeemer, Deliverer and Helper. We preach the good news of hope, forgiveness, new life and new beginnings to the Whymes of the world, because all is not lost for Whyme or for anyone who chooses faith in the risen Christ. We preach the good news that our God is the Way-Maker where there seems to be no way and the unfailing Provider from expected and most unexpected sources to His glory and honor.

First and foremost, you must change the picture of how you see and understand yourself. What kind of self-talk or inner conversation do you have with yourself?

Change begins on the inside. You hardly can go to a place you haven't seen or imagined yourself arriving at. Imagination is key. It is the picture of your tomorrow. You said you are in school to get your GED while incarcerated.

That's great! I'm happy for you. The key to perseverance and academic success is the ability to see it first in your mind, to keep your focus on the finish line, to be able to imagine yourself—yes, picture yourself—in academic hood and gown walking to the podium to receive your certificate even though you are still struggling to master the ABCs of the course. You've got to see it first in your mind and imagination before it happens.

There was a time when virtually everything we see and use today was nonexistent. It existed first in someone's imagination. Back in the 1700s or 400 years ago there were no automobiles, no petrol engine cars plying the roads. Some people thought about the possibility of an engine powered car as means of transportation, imagined it, worked progressively towards the picture they saw in their minds, and today we even travel by air. Many years ago, the world did not have personal computers, tablets, or smart phones. Some people dreamt about the possibility, nursed the idea in their minds, meditated on it day and night, worked towards the picture they had in their minds, and today, we have those inventions like our birthrights.

The history of the world has been shaped and changed by those who saw and imagined a not-yet-picture of the future and asked, "Why not?" They then worked towards the image imprinted in their minds. We call them inventors. They produce, contrive, or fabricate something previously unknown by use of their imagination and ingenuity—and they changed the world. In like manner, your world, your life of addiction, will change if you can imagine or create a different future for your life. When that picture gets a hold of you and it becomes engraved in you, it will release creative power, resources, and energy for its fulfillment. How about this: There was a time when even the universe did not exist. God conceived the idea, imagined it, and spoke the picture in His (God's) mind into existence. In Hebrews 11:3 we read, "By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible." And again, God "gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did," (Rom. 4:17d). Can you see yourself free of all addictions and committed to Christ? Change your language: begin to call

yourself free of addiction and a new person in Christ.

What kind of self-talk or inner conversation do you have about yourself with yourself on a regular basis? Is it positive and successful, or negative and one of a failure or addiction? Someone has said, “Where the mind goes, the body follows.” That’s the more reason why you need to manage or control your thoughts. Entertain only wholesome and positive thoughts about yourself and your future. The Apostle Paul gives us a think-list in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.”

Thousands of thoughts flash through our minds daily. Thoughts are like seeds; they will germinate and grow when planted and rooted in the soil of your heart. Some of the thoughts are God-sent and are divine ideas. They are God painting a picture for you to believe for your tomorrow. Other thoughts are not divine, but sensual or demonic. Behind them are the spirit of this wicked world and unclean spirits sending these thoughts that can weaken you; discourage you or even lead to temptations to do certain wrong things. The seed (or progenitor) of our actions (and crimes) is our thought and desire (Jam. 1:13-15). Behind each thought is a picture. We can slow down the flow of thoughts and capture, freeze or replay the picture behind the thought. When we freeze it and dwell on it, meditating and embracing it, that thought-imagination sequence then becomes a stronghold—(2 Cor. 10:5, 6). That stronghold can mean one of two things. It can be prison or a fortress. If that thought-picture-imagination sequence is negative, that’s a prison; that weakens you and that leads to negativity thinking, believing, and living. You were already a prisoner to your addiction long before the law enforcement officers arrested you and the court system jailed you. Yet, if the thought-picture-imagination is healthy, that’s a fortress. That’s positive thinking that leads to positive living. The likes of Bill Gates or Steve Jobs have changed the world, because they ventured on a positive thought-imagination sequence that has resulted in a fortress of wealth and worldwide influence.

It is in the mind that we fight the battles of life. It is in the mind that we first lose or win those battles. The picture of yourself that you see with your eyes closed sooner than later becomes your destiny. If you can change the picture of yourself that you see from one who is addicted and lives among drug-addicts to a picture of God's grace working in your life to change and be a productive person; that's progress. The mind is the battleground for all our battles, including addiction. Changing the way you see yourself is the starting point. Now, let me give you the verses of Scripture I already alluded to which show that everything originates first from the heart (our thought and desire). I will also give a familiar quote that you probably already know:

4For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, 5casting down arguments [imaginations, KJV] and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, 6and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Cor. 10:4-6)

14But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. 15Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. (Jam. 1:14, 15).

“Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny.”

No Neutrality or Vacuum in Life

As you can see, everything begins with a thought. The thought is the seed that becomes action, and the action progresses along the continuum to become a destiny. I need to ask you this: If you no longer want to do drugs (or smoke, or watch pornography, or abuse alcohol, or whatever addiction you want to change), if you no longer want to do those things, what new things do you want to do or new habits to adopt? If you no longer want to associate with friends and family that have got you into this lifestyle, who are the kind of people of a different lifestyle with whom you would want to begin to hang around? From the onset, I want you to understand that it is not just a question of what you don't want to do or who you don't want to be, but what you

are now committed to do and the kind of person you are now determined to be. Why is this important? I'm glad you asked. Jesus told this parable:

43 "When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. 44 Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. 45 Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation," (Matt. 12:43-45).

You see, the man got rid of one unclean spirit, one demon, (one addiction), but his life was not gainfully occupied by anything else. Becoming clean was not enough; it was just half of the deal. Demons or unclean spirits are like viruses. Unclean spirits don't have a life of their own unless they inhabit a person or an animal through which they manifest their foul traits. In like manner, viruses are non-living until they inhabit a host living organism in which they then rapidly replicate themselves exponentially and cause damage to the cells of the host. The unclean spirit or demon (in Jesus' parable) that left came back and found the "house" empty. Not wanting to be dislodged ever again, he went and brought seven other demons more deadly and wicked than himself. So, the latter end was worse. The person failed to adopt a new lifestyle that would have kept the house—his heart—buzzing with activities of the new occupants. He was better off to not have gotten rid of the initial demon than getting rid of it and not have new and worthy occupiers of his heart.

Have you ever met someone who quit smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol for a couple of months or years but is now—after his relapse—addicted to pot and hard drugs and worst things than with which he initially struggled? Let's consider someone whose first bid in jail was for a misdemeanor or lesser crime and swore that incarceration was never going to be his story but has after his first bid been returning to jail for increasingly more violent crimes and more time? It may not tell the entire story, but part of their reality was that though they may be truly sober they nonetheless never got

engaged or absorbed in a more meaningful pastime. The house was swept and empty with no gainful occupant.

To put it in another way, “Begin with the end in mind,” as Stephen Covey said in “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.” Who do you hope to be and what do you hope to be doing that’s different from who you are now and what you do now? Shift your mind from what things are at present and focus your mind on towards what you’ll like to progress. You are not what people call you or what label they give you; you are who or what God calls you. God says to you, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine,” (Isa. 43:1g). Yes, you are God’s; you belong to God. You are not what you are addicted to or struggle with; you are a beloved child of God—“ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,” as a church hymn proclaims. You don’t have to be held captive by, chained to, and forever defined by your past; you can embrace a brand-new future in Christ. Don’t see your reality as a person dressed in prison uniform; rather, see your reality as one clothed in the righteousness of God, dressed in a three-piece suit dining with your father-in-law.

There’s nothing like autonomous freedom. No one is truly free. The truth is that you are going to exchange your addiction for another “addiction.” Let me explain what I mean by that. You and I serve, or are “addicted” to, or are captured by something or someone. It just happens that some masters are good masters who add value and meaning to our lives. Like it or not, we all worship and bow at the altars of certain intangible idols. The altar or idol could be money, success, popularity, materialism, physical fitness, religion, spirituality, sex, or entertainment. We say we are free and live in a free world when, in reality, we are slaves to something and have certain intangible masters pulling the strings, whether we admit it or not. Written in 1762, the opening statement of Rousseau’s Social Contract Theory, “Man is born free but everywhere he goes he’s in chains,” is worth mentioning here. The worst chains today are the self-inflicted chains of addiction. The Apostle Peter writes, “People are slaves to whatever has mastered them,” (2 Pet. 2:19c; NIV). How true! The good news is, in reality, Jesus saves you from bondage

to sin, Satan and addiction so you can transfer your former allegiance to sin, Satan and addiction to Him.

Grace disengages you from sin and addiction so you may re-engage God and righteousness. There can be no vacuum or neutrality as you recall from Jesus' parable. You drop the label, "drug addict," and pick a new label, "crucified with Christ," (Gal. 2:20). Christ now becomes your new Master, and you become His happy slave because His yoke (or burden) is easier and lighter (see Matt. 11:28, 29) than those that are killing you. If you want to be free of your addiction (to drugs, porn, or alcoholism) but you don't want to become a new person in Christ and keep company with Christ's people, you don't have to continue reading this chapter, because I have nothing else to offer you. Paul explained that we are "set free from sin, and ... become slaves of God" in Romans 6:18, 22,

And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness... But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.

"If You Did All That for Me, Then I'll Go with You."

In one of his sermons on the "Parables of Jesus/Stories Jesus told," Pastor Paul Beck of Loudonville Community Church in Albany, expounding on Luke 17, shared a story from the Civil War days, which illustrates another way to understand our Master-slave relationship with Christ. This was before the American Emancipation Proclamation ending slavery and freeing slaves. According to the story, a Northerner went South to an auction and purchased a young girl. As they walked away from the auction, the new slave owner turned to the girl and announced: "You're free!" Puzzled, the girl asked her new master what he meant. He repeated: "You're free!" Nervously, the girl inquired, "You mean I am free to go anywhere?" The Northerner replied, "Yes, you're free to go anywhere." The girl asked again, "You mean I am free to say anything?" "Yes, you are free to say anything you want to say." Dazed because it was too good to be true, the girl once more asked, "You mean I am free to be anything I want to be?" The man again assured her, "Yes, you

are free to go wherever you want to go; you are free to say anything you want to say; you are free to be whatever you want to be.” The girl looked at this benevolent and compassionate new owner and said, “If I am free to go wherever I want to go, free to say anything I want to say, free to be whatever I want to be, then I’ll go with you.” She was freed but chose to enslave herself to her new magnanimous owner who just bought her from the slave market and set her free from the bondage of slavery.

That’s the picture of our freedom. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many,” (Mark 10:45). Jesus, by His self-sacrificial death and resurrection, gave His life as “a ransom” for us, and in so doing has delivered and bought us back from the slave market of sin, addiction, and the devil. Realizing that Jesus is a better Master and not a cruel slave owner, a kind and benevolent Deliverer, we voluntarily choose to bind ourselves to Him as His new slaves and serve Him wholeheartedly. Like the freed young girl in the story, we say to Jesus, in essence, “If You, the Creator, had to leave the glory of heaven and become a part of Your creation, if You, the Immortal, Invisible God put on human flesh and walked the earth, if You risked everything including Your life, and endured unimaginable degree of disgrace, rejection, humiliation, and death on the cruel cross to save me, if You did all that for me, then I’ll go with You.” Little wonder that the Apostle Paul wrote that “this view of God’s mercy” is the impetus for us “to offer [our] bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is [our] spiritual [reasonable; NKJV] act of worship,” (Rom. 12:1; NIV).

What is Addiction?

Addiction is a psychological or physiological dependence, especially on a drug; something that’s not good for you but that you keep craving for anyway. Drugs give you a high but then drop you into the pits. Once you are hooked, they become for you your lifeline and you’ve got to have them to keep going.

Most burglaries and teenage prostitutions are drug related. We once had a deeply religious orthodox Jew who served a term for burglary. He was steal-

ing to maintain his drug addiction. He was so high he was oblivious to his surroundings and unconscious of his actions. He did not even remember he was committing, or had committed, any crime, until the police picked him up. The cameras, his DNA (sample from blood drip from glass cut) and fingerprints put him on the crime scene. The worst part of it that was so embarrassing for this observant Jew was that he had committed the crime on a Sabbath! It was like an out-of-body experience to him. That scares me when I think of so many who are addicted to drugs. To his credit, if I may say so, he was recovering from drug addiction when his physician carelessly prescribed a medication in the same family of his drug addiction. This was the trigger that led him down, deeper down, the dangerous old path again.

Somehow, I have a soft spot and sympathy for some inmates, usually older men in their 50s, who were hardworking individuals with no criminal history but are now serving terms for vehicular accidents that caused injury to others or manslaughter resulting from DWI/DUI, because they resorted to alcohol and drugs when hit by the vicissitudes of life. Some of them, having no faith to turn to, or for lack of family or community support, became vulnerable when introduced to alcohol and drugs to drown their sorrows and soothe their heartache after a tragedy, such as loss of spouse or child, bitter divorce, downturn in business, freak accidents, or some other misfortunes. I have listened to some who claimed they were trapped, were far-gone and helpless and knew, within themselves, that something drastic had to happen to bring them back to sanity and were thankful for their jail sentence especially if no life was lost. Such inmates are usually the preferred candidates as chaplain clerks, because both civilian staff and correctional officers in the ministerial building know they are nonviolent offenders and usually less threatening.

No one can define addiction better than the addict himself/herself. Simply put without psychological and clinical jargons, addiction is when the body or mind badly wants or needs something to work right. Some have referred to it as self-medication for the pain that is deep inside. The question that begs asking then is: What pain are you trying to anaesthetize with drugs or anything else that's now become an addiction for you? Could it be the pain of

rejection, abandonment, sexual abuse by the adult caregivers who were supposed to protect you, negative criticism and lack of affirmation from parents, loneliness, rape, incest, and self-hate, absent dad syndrome or what I like to refer to as a different type of ADD (Absent Dad Disorder) or ADHD (Absent Dad Hyperactive Disorder)? There are many helps and helpful programs out in the public to help to combat and overcome addiction. Anything that is helpful, long-term, or short-term, without robbing Peter to pay Paul is commendable. I can only speak from what I know, which is what I intend to do without discrediting any program.

For certain, many cases of addictions today and most of modern mental health maladies would have been classified and treated as demonic activities in the New Testament era. It is debatable if addiction comes under “works [or weaknesses] of the flesh,” (Gal. 5:19-21) or demon possession, that is, control by an unclean spirit. I vacillate too. If I hold that the person who is addicted to drugs or alcoholism or watching porn is controlled or possessed by “an unclean spirit” or a “demon,” then the individual is a victim. A victim mentality makes you dependent and utterly powerless. You need external/outside help—a Deliverer, or medication. The secular society believes addiction is a mental health issue or a disease of the mind. We cure diseases of the body like diabetes or cancer with medication, different forms of therapy, surgery, or radiation, why shouldn't we cure the diseases of the mind with medication in like manner? Rather than confront, we are sympathetic to those who are sick in their bodies, it behooves us to do the same with those who are sick in the mind or brain. You cannot, in good faith, ask a person to change (or repent—using church language) if his alcoholism is a disease or if, by your understanding, he is a captive of an unclean spirit or a disease.

On the other hand, if I stick with human responsibility and the belief that addiction is a personal choice gone wild and that the person can begin to rethink, and change his mind and action, then I am denying the power of bondage that addiction wields. Many books have been written and seminars presented on this powerful, true, and popular phrase, “Change your thoughts; change your life/world.” Powerful truth, however, can sometimes be cold, cruel, and callous.

Most people want to change but are powerless against their “personal demons,” as some have referred to their addiction. I believe it is both. I believe an addict needs an external help, therapy, medication, spiritual or higher power. I also believe the potential power of human determination, self-accountability, of the bulldog tenacity of a “made up mind,” or a “I’ve had enough” desperate desire for change. Without a doubt, our choices (or their consequences) have the power of life and death. My firm belief in human dignity, being made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-28), the redemptive power of the cross (Col. 1:13) and the potential and resilience of the human soul compels me not to give up on human becoming transformed for victory.

Addiction is to be captured, overpowered, and held hostage by some spirits—meaning you need help, spiritual help in this case. It is also a situation where when you wake up on the inside (like the prodigal son did in Luke 15:17-21) and realize you are a human being, a human becoming created in the image and likeness of God, that you are better than what holds you down, you will choose to think and act differently and will eventually rise above any addiction or bondage. This is the direction I want to go—the spiritual and personal decision/choice. I will challenge you that there’s power in the name of Jesus to set you free. John 8:36—“Therefore if the Son [Jesus] makes you free, you shall be free indeed.” And I will challenge you that once Christ takes residence in your life by the Holy Spirit, then, truly, “He [Christ] who is in you is greater than he [a legion of demons or addictions] who is in the world,” (1 Jn. 4:4d) and that you “can do all things through Christ who strengthens” you, (Phil. 4:13). Does that mean a true Christian cannot be addicted? No! A thousand times, no! It suggests though, that a healthy Christian, filled with the Holy Spirit, may struggle but he’s struggling on the victory path, knowing that victory has been secured for him as he runs to the finish line. Now, “healthy” is the operative word in the last sentence.

How do we define a “healthy Christian” is the million-dollar question and is it not for this portion of the book? Suffice to say here that it will be wrong of us, and it will be a disservice to Bible-based, authentic Christian faith, if we attempt to understand or filter “the gospel of Christ... the power of God to

salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16) through human experience. We have no gospel to preach if our message is devoid of supernatural power to save, heal and deliver. For example, I prayed and fasted for many days, weeks and months when my late wife, Olawanle, was battling cancer. Yet, she died of the cancer; endometrial cancer ended her life in this world, and she stepped into the next. Should I then say that God does not heal any more in answer to prayers? That divine healing ended with the first century Christianity? Worse still, that God has the power to heal our headaches, toothaches and stomach upset but not enough power to heal cancer, diabetes or infections from corona virus? Wouldn’t that be limiting and defining (or redefining) God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—through the lens of my narrow experience? In the same vein, the fact that some Christians battle addiction all their lives doesn’t remove from the truth of the Scripture that “He [Christ] is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them,” (Heb. 7:25).

I will go further to say that when you are “in Christ” you are no longer a captive but are free to choose without being under the compulsion of some strange spirits or crippling power of an addiction. In other words, once you used to do “it”—whatever the it is—because you couldn’t help yourself, but now you do “it” not because you couldn’t say no, but because you want to. Do you see the difference? When you were “in Adam” you sinned because you couldn’t help but sin—that’s what sinners do, and you couldn’t do otherwise. Now that you are “in Christ” you are free to sin and free not to sin, free to say no to the life of addiction and free to say yes to a new life. You are free to obey God and choose right living and you are free to disobey God and choose the bondage of addiction. Romans 6:

12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. 13 And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. 14 For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace, (Rom. 6:12-14).

In his valedictory speech to the Israelites, Moses, after 40 years of leading them from slavery to Egypt and through the wilderness to the borders of the Promised Land, said it boiled down to choice, to choosing between two paths and their consequent results. He said,

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil...

I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live,” (Deut. 30:15, 19).

Under the Influence

The phrase, “Under the Influence,” though almost always used with a negative connotation as in DUI (driving under the influence—“drunk driving”), is a phrase that may perhaps help to explain how addiction works and how to recover from it, in a Biblical sense. In Ephesians 5:18, the apostle Paul draws an analogy between someone who is drunk and someone who is under the control of the Holy Spirit because the two individuals have lost control and are now “under the influence.” Paul writes, “And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit.” He was saying in essence, don’t be drunk on wine but be drunk in the Spirit of God.

A drunk is under the control or influence of alcohol—a kind of temporary insanity in which he not only loses his senses but has as well surrendered the control of his mind to alcohol or drugs. We say he’s under the influence, because another power takes over and transforms him into someone he never was before. One minute he’s nice, peaceful and quiet, the next he’s noisy, gibberish and overexcited; one minute he knows who he is and who you are, the next minute he has no idea who he is or who you are. Why? Something else is running the show. What alcohol does to the mind and personality in a negative sense the Holy Spirit does in a person in a positive sense. When a person is Spirit filled as Paul enjoins the Ephesian Christians, he is also under the influence. Someone else—the Holy Spirit—takes over and runs the show. When you are under the control of the Holy Spirit, He makes you walk, talk, act, and relate to people in ways you wouldn’t normally which will be in tune

with your new nature in Christ. Therefore, rather than spending time and energy concentrating on trying to change, we should spend time and energy concentrating on how to be continually filled and controlled by the Holy Spirit.

A Man of Many Hats

I wear many hats. I am a pastor, a teacher, a biblical counselor, and a board-certified clinical chaplain. As a clinical chaplain one of what we do, or aim to do, is to “get into the boat” with the client/patient. “Get into the boat” is a metaphor for journeying along with a distraught or troubled person, being emotional present, offering nonjudgmental listening, and empathy. When we truly “get into the boat” with a sufferer through empathic listening, the result is that the patient or client ceases to be “the other,” “the helpless,” or “the afflicted” to us but has become someone with whom we share a human connectedness and communal brokenness. It is then that we can step in and walk in his or her shoes and better understand or feel where he or she is or is coming from. As the idiom goes, “Before you judge a man, walk a mile in his shoes.” “Getting into the boat” with the client or patient helps us to be empathic, empathetic, nonjudgmental, and attentive listeners. We do not have and neither do we push or promote a personal agenda or be the problem solver. Rather we go with the flow, we go where the client takes us. By active listening we help the patient get in touch with himself or herself and tap into his or her own power and inner resources. Everybody is a gifted storyteller in the presence of a nonjudgmental active listener.

Most times, as chaplains, we have no wisdom to share, because it is not a ministry of words or preaching but of presence, of one soul connecting with another in the volume of unspoken words that fill the silence. Maybe it is not a happenstance that the same six letters of the alphabet form the words “Silent” and “Listen.” We hear words when words are spoken, but we observe and listen more to the nonverbal communication in the room. We hear with our ears, but we listen with our hearts. We often communicate our care nonverbally than with words, and we invoke and together experience God’s

presence through unuttered prayers. Healing begins when a person feels she's been heard or listened to; that she's been shown to be worth something to someone; and that her story—yea, her life—though presently turned upside down, has been affirmed and validated. It is that gift of undivided attention and active listening that provides affirmation, rebuilds self-worth, and begins to restore personal dignity to a person to whom life has thrown a curveball. When we are able to connect and travel some distance with a wounded soul and lift up that soul through our pastoral presence, irrespective of their belief system, we ourselves experience healing for our own soul and, for a brief moment, we feel as if we had touched and healed the whole world.

Everybody has a heart that's been broken. Some have hearts that have been broken and mended, scared and deformed by insensitive people and harrowing circumstances. Everybody has a story, and it's a heart story that needs to be listened to. We are formed and shaped by our story, our reality. The things that do not make sense and behaviors that do not make sense begin to make some sense, and are perceived differently, and even become explainable and understandable when we know the stories behind them. When we hear the story beneath the mask of the victimizer, we might unwittingly unmask a victim as well. Our stories put meaning on what's meaningless to others. Because our stories and realities are different, it is difficult to offer a "one-size-fits-all" remedy. Every reader struggling with an addiction or mental illness has a unique story, a story that renders all human judgments and evaluations irrelevant. I have said all this to let you know that I am here to help, to help from where you are presently to where you want to be.

If it were possible, I want to "get into the boat" with you, walk in your shoes, breath the same air with you, and afford you a nonjudgmental and empathic listening to your story, thereby helping me to be more appreciative of your struggles. I can only try but can never understand what another person is going through unless I have lived the life. For example, in all my years as a teacher in inner-city middle schools in New York City, no group of preteens and early teenagers believed that I, a black man, had never been frisked by the Police, but it is the truth. I relocated to the US as a middle-aged

man. These 12, 13, 14-year olds, however, have been frisked countless times and many have their records tainted with pointless misdemeanors, non-indictable offenses and jaywalking charges, charges that could be used someday to establish a pattern and build a case against them in the penal system. Here they are, already on the Police radar before they are old enough to get a drivers' license. I cannot pretend to know what that does to a young black man's psyche; much less pretend to know what drug addiction is. I never lived that life and never experienced those realities.

For the rest of this chapter, I may not be wearing my clinical chaplain's hat; I will be putting on my biblical counselor's hat. My working definition for counseling is, "the process of helping counselees change." The three key words are PROCESS, HELPING and CHANGE. I believe tough love is not antithetical to empathy and being forthright does not mean lacking sympathy. Cleaning and dressing a wound hurts and is painful, but it is necessary for the wound to heal. The classical definition of insanity is doing the same thing again and again and expecting a different result each time. I will be asking you to do and think differently, because if you do and think as you always do you will keep getting the same results. With God, I believe you can begin to author or rewrite your story on a template of grace. However, to everyone struggling with an addiction or mental health issue, I want you to know that as a chaplain my purpose is to walk with you, to support you, to come alongside you in whatever helps you to manage or maintain some normalcy, adjust, adapt, recover or go on from day to day, one day at a time. I am for any help, any program, if it is not doing more harm than good. That is to say, if you are in the 12 Step Program, please make the best of it. If you are on medication, please take your medicine religiously. If you are in a group therapy or seeing a therapist, please, by all means, take full advantage of it. I am here to affirm whatever helps you to cope with life as you currently experience life.

Whatever is your present crutch, survival tactic or coping mechanism, even if it is denial, avoidance, a relationship, religion, food, work, volunteering, traveling, shopping or window-shopping, a picture/photograph,

pendant, rosary, holy water or any other ritual or symbol, as long as it is not hurting anyone or doing further damage to you, who am I to say you shouldn't hold on to such? It's not my life, it's your life and my personal persuasions or anyone else's personal opinions are immaterial. A neighbor and helper is all I want to be, and it's all I can be. Our lives have many chapters and phases. In this present chapter or phase of your life, if I may, I want to be there for you as you work things through and move from Point A to Point B. Any movement in the right direction, even baby steps, is worth celebrating.

Parenthetically, just for the record: It is not enough for the chaplain to be empathetic and "get into the boat" with the client/patient, another equally critically important skill for a chaplain is to know when to get off a boat that's beginning to fill with water otherwise he and the client will sink together. A chaplain (or counselor) that does not know when to get off the boat, make referrals, self-care, take a breather, or seek personal help will soon find herself a recipient of pastoral care from a hospital chaplain.

For the rest of the chapter I will discuss biblical change, and I will use the example of Mary Magdalene for two reasons. First, she was possessed by seven demons—a condition I consider a parallel to modern day addictions—which Jesus cast out of her, and secondly, she went full-force in a new direction, never looking back. She became a truly new person.

Mary Magdalene had a past, but her past did not determine her possibilities in the Kingdom. She was once demon possessed, once a terrible sinner, but she met Jesus and was changed. She never again looked into her rear-view mirror. She kept looking and moving forward in Christ. As Jesus said, he who is forgiven much loves more (Luke 7:36-50, esp. v. 47). She was forgiven much, delivered from much, and she loved more. As with Mary Magdalene your past can be the past. The past does not have to determine your future or define who you are. You can embrace a new identity. That's what Mary Magdalene did. Don't ever forget this: regardless of your past—and your past may be filled with demons, horrible crimes, demonic oppression, and addictions—your future in Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit of God, can be glorious. Ready? Fasten your seat belt.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL CHANGE OR CHRISTIAN CONVERSION?

Reformation Versus Transformation³¹

Change is hard but not impossible. Biblical change or transformation is facilitated by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit in a believer, the regenerative power (or washing) of the Word as we meditate daily on the Bible, spiritual renewal through prayer, personal devotional time with God and the loving support of a faith community or local church.

Biblical change is described in several ways; for example, conversion, transformation, “born again,” or “new life.” It is not reformation, however. Reformation is a human attempt to change. Reformation is good and helpful and needed in society, but it is only skin deep. It is behavioral change—which is good—except that it is working from the outside. The individual’s perspective or heart or belief system has not really been changed or altered. In some cases, the change in habit or external behavior often results in a change of heart. Yet, most times, when situations get tough and circumstances change or ease up it is easy to revert to the normal or familiar.

Reformation is like rearranging the furniture in the room. The room looks different, but nothing has changed, things just got rearranged or moved around the room—still the same couch, table and chairs. Reformation is the business of City Hall and the secular educational/citizenship programs. The jail/penal system is designed for reformation of character, not human warehousing. Jail time, confinement, pain and punishment often force some to become re-educated and to change their behavior. For some, “Change happens when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change,” (Anthony Robbins, self-help author and success coach). For example, dog trainers use reward and punishment to train dogs to obey orders. Most people have a sense of what is right and wrong but not all have the courage to do the

31. Although updated here, the rest of this chapter was the first series of Bible studies I had with the inmates in the beginning of my chaplaincy in 2013. It was the first of a three-volume series on Biblical Change that I hurriedly put together when I resumed duty. The print shop in the facility helped to print and bind the copies.

right thing. You've probably heard or said this, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak," (Matt. 26:41b). Spiritual transformation provides the empowerment.

Regarding the weakness of reformation, the writer of Proverbs puts it this way, "As a dog returns to his own vomit, So a fool repeats his folly," (Prov. 26:11). Apostle Peter sadly tells of some backsliders, "But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: 'A dog returns to his own vomit,' and, 'a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire,'" (2 Pet. 2:22). Why did the sow go back into her mire? It was cleaned only on the outside. An example of human reformation is seen in Simon. In Acts 8:9-25, we read of a Simon who supposedly believed in Jesus and turned from his former practice of sorcery, but his conversion was not deep enough. The profession of his mouth was correct, but his heart was still unchanged.

Biblical Change as a Three-Factor Process

Biblical change is a three-factor process; it involves three processes (according to Ephesians 4:22-24; Romans 12:2)

22 that you PUT OFF, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, 23 and BE RENEWED IN THE SPIRIT OF YOUR MIND,³² and that you PUT ON the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22-24; emphasis mine)

And do not be conformed to this world, but BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:2; emphasis mine)

The three processes are:

32. It was difficult for me to trace the original source of "People, Places and Practices", which I learned during my doctoral studies in Biblical counseling. If the phrase/concept was original to my professor I hereby give him credit. If not, I use it with gratitude to whoever coined the phrase. Relating to change, I found various similar expressions like People, Places and Perceptions; People, Places, and Space; People, Places and Environment but no one could be sure of the originators.

1. Conviction (put off, genuine desire for change)
2. Conversion (mind renewal; change of perception)
3. Commitment (put on, inculcating a new lifestyle)

Without re-education, a new understanding in the thinking processes, or mind renewal (Rom. 12:1, 2) change is impossible or impossible to sustain. “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still,” Dale Carnegie. Anything short of a deep inner conviction or change of heart is like rearranging the furniture, same, same... Transformation entails bringing out the old furniture, (not remodeling or repainting the furniture) and replacing them with new set of furniture. There are three important facilitators of change and three important inhibitors of change. Until these three are altered no change is possible. These three factors are PEOPLE, PLACES and PRACTICES.

1. Conviction

The “Put Off” or 3 P’s (or Radical Amputation for the Ultimate Goal or Ultimate Good)

Are you ready for some practical steps to freedom? I call this first stage of the “Put off-Put on” the radical amputation for the ultimate goal or good. Jesus says in Matthew 18:8, 9

8 “If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire.

Jesus didn’t literally mean for you to cut off hand or foot or gouge out your eyes, but that you should be willing to part with anything, situation or person, no matter how dear and close to you, if that thing, situation or person is leading you in the wrong path. In the table below, identify people, places and practices that need to be eliminated from your life if you are to go in a different direction seriously and become a new person. I recall you said that though you could get drugs in jail you have not used in a while during this

incarceration. That buttresses the point that the place you are and the people you associate with play prominent roles in the direction of your life. We've heard it said, "Show me your friends and I will tell you who you are." There is no lasting change until you have a new set of friends.

Association is very powerful, and it can be positive or negative. In 2 Timothy 1:5 we read how "genuine faith" from Grandma Lois was passed to Mom Eunice and was later passed on to their grandson/son, Timothy. That's an example of positive influence of a godly home environment. We read the interesting accounts when Saul, who was neither a prophet nor enrolled in the prophetic school, found himself amongst or in close proximity to the prophets, (1 Sam. 10:6, 9-12; 19:20-24), that he also began to prophesy. Not knowing how to explain this phenomenon, the proverbial talk in the town was: "Is Saul also among the prophets?" (1 Sam. 10:11, 12; 19:24). We can say that when Saul came too close to the prophets he came under the influence of the Holy Spirit and he also, not a prophet by calling, lineage or profession, began to prophesy.

This dramatic change by association happened at least twice in Saul's life. As soon as Saul came in the "atmosphere," "climate," or "environment" where prophets were prophesying, he became a new or changed person (1 Sam. 10:6, 11, 12) and he also prophesied. I can assure you that you don't have to have a prophetic gene in your body, just get close enough to the band of prophets and the Spirit will get hold of you. That's the power of influence. In like manner, you don't have to have a criminal gene in your body, just get close enough to someone who does, someone in crime business, and you'll join the band. If you get back into the same "atmosphere" or "climate" of crime that brought you to jail, guess what? It may be *déjà vu*, "Prison, here I come" for you again; back in this place dressed in prison uniform.

Johnny, not his name, a released lifer is back in jail today, most probably for the rest of his life. He was a Christian in jail, always coming to Bible study and was going to church after his release. He was serving a life sentence when I met him in Arthurkill CF, where I was a volunteer leading a monthly Bible/Prayer seminar for my mentor, Chaplain Cleveland Thornhill, before

the facility was closed. Jonny was working in a filling station after his release. However, five or six years after his release he was again involved in a robbery where firearms were used. He was not the one who pulled the trigger but that doesn't count, when you already have a bad record. He got sucked back into crime. The problem: He didn't have a radical amputation from old friends and old ways; he did not run far enough from the kind of group that led him to jail in the first instance. In no uncertain terms the scripture warns us against crowd pressure or peer pressure:

“Be not deceived: Evil communications corrupt good manners,” (1 Cor. 15:33; KJV). “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character.’” (NIV); “You shall not follow a crowd to do evil,” (Exo. 23:2a). “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong.” (NIV).

Use the table below to jumpstart your plan of action. In the second column across from or alongside “people,” put the initials of the individuals who are your partners, helpers, or mentors in committing crimes or sustaining your life of addiction.

SEETHING FACTORS TO BE ELIMINATED (The Put Off).	MY ACTION PLAN FOR VICTORY, BABY STEPS TOWARDS MY GOAL OF NEW LIFE
PEOPLE: What people have put you in most troubles? That is, associates. Bad company corrupts good morals - 1 Cor. 15:33. A person tends to drift towards the values of his associates. PLACES: What places have resulted in great problems for you? What kind of places do you frequent?	
PRACTICES: What habits have led you to this place? What kind of practices do you engage in? What kind of reading materials, movies, sports, games, TV programming, etc.	

Before I leave this section on radical amputation for the ultimate good, let me retell a sad but true story.³³ It took place in Ukraine. A middle-aged truck driver came into the doctor's office one day, holding his finger wrapped in a dirty bandage. "Doctor, do something, the finger hurts me when I drive." As the doctor unwrapped the bandage the man grimaced in pain. The doctor discovered that the finger was badly infected and that gangrene had obviously set in. "I'm sorry the condition is bad. I will have to amputate your finger and do it right away. I'm afraid that's the only way I can help you." "Never!" the man shouted in anger, "I've hurt a finger lots of times before, and it always healed. I'm not going to let you cut it off. Wrap it up again." "Sir, you are risking your life," the doctor began to plead with the man but he would not listen. He slammed the door and walked out of the doctor's office.

On the third day the man came back. His eyes were red and bloodshot from loss of sleep. He told the doctor, "All right, you win. Go ahead and cut off my finger. I can't stand it any longer." The doctor removed the bandage. The man's arm was swollen all the way up to the elbow, and his whole hand was dark purple. The doctor exclaimed in horror, "I'm sorry, my friend. The infection has spread. I'll have to cut off your whole hand now!" "My hand? No, you won't. I have to support my family. I give you permission to cut off my finger but not my hand..." The truck driver would not budge. He once more stamped out of the office in rage.

A week later, an ambulance came to the hospital where the doctor was on duty. The big man was brought on a stretcher this time. He was delirious with a high fever. His eyes stared and his burning lips hardly moved. He could no longer speak. His frightened wife was at his side. "Doctor, save my husband," she pleaded. "I give you permission to cut off his hand, but please, don't let him die." The doctor carefully examined the sick man. Then he turned to the crying woman and quietly stated, "Madam, I'm very sorry, but it is too late. No one can help him anymore..."

How sad! If the man had agreed to a radical, even ruthless, amputation

33. Reported in "Honey from the Hive," 366 Daily Devotional by Joseph Stoll; Pathway Publishers, p. 209

of his “offensive” or troublesome finger, he could have lived to continue to support his family. In the same manner, many sitting in jails today, can look back to a certain day, certain event, or certain person, and regretfully say to themselves, “I wish I had run away then, I wish I had said no and stuck with it, I wish I had kept a good distance.” The little, seemingly innocuous event, had snowballed into an unimaginable and unmanageable lifestyle. As the proverb goes, “A stitch in time saves nine.”

2. Conversion

New Understanding, New Perception or Re-education; (or “My mind is made up.”)

Jesus told a parable of New Wine/Old Wine in Luke 5:36-39. Here it goes:

Then He spoke a parable to them: “No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’”

The double parable is about incompatibility. Although Christianity has its roots in Judaism and is an offshoot of it, it is nonetheless a New Covenant. We read in Hebrews 8:7-13 that a new covenant became necessary, because God found fault with the old covenant (vv. 7 and 8) and He had to make it “obsolete” (v. 13). Jesus was saying that you cannot mend an old cloth by patching it with a new and you cannot put new wine into old wine skin; the old cannot be simply patched up with the new and expect a good result. Jesus wanted us to clear out the old ways, because creativity or God’s idea cannot flow into the old fossilized minds. According to the Scriptures, God set aside the Old Covenant before God established the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:7-13). Syncretism is the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought. That wouldn’t work.

New thoughts require a new mindset; new ways of life require a new thinking pattern. You cannot change your situation until you are ready to change your thinking. Centuries later, Albert Einstein restated the same concept in one of his famous quotes, “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”

The concluding verse in Jesus’ parable is very pathetic: “And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’ ” Like his taste buds are activated only by the old wine this person’s mind has become a one-way track. He is satisfied in his narrow worldview. His mind is fossilized, and he is unwilling to dream or explore, because he’s trapped in the status quo. It’s like the story of a frog that lives in a well in a farmer’s backyard. Having never seen any other body of water this frog believes that his well is all the water in the world and contains all aquatic life in the universe, not knowing that there are wide oceans and sprawling limitless living organisms in bodies of water outside its pond or well. Ignorance is not bliss for its limited thinking and complacency.

Biblical change is transformation and deeper than reformation, because there is a heart change, a mind renewal, a new outlook. A new education, new understanding, new perspective, or heart condition has taken place. You now begin to function with a new belief system. A change of mind, attitude and behavior has taken place. A roundabout turn has taken place. We sometimes refer to this as repentance. A new life has begun. It is a change from within; from inside out. The individual speaks of “before” and “after.” Transformation is “a matter of the heart,” or a love affair.

There cannot be any possibility of change that’s transformational without a change of thought and thinking processes about the problem. If you are half convinced and not fully persuaded that “doing drugs” is damaging your life and relationships, that it is probably not as bad as it appears to be, then forget it. Forget about change, because change won’t happen in that belief atmosphere.

3. Commitment

The “Put On” or 3 P’s (or Deliberate Grafting for Growth in A New Direction)

The third phase is the commitment to a new master, holding allegiance to a new set of rules or principles, dancing to a new tune, and keeping company with new set of friends.

FAVORING FACTORS TO BE ENCOURAGED (The Put On)	MY ACTION PLAN FOR VICTORY, BABY STEPS TOWARDS MY GOAL OF NEW LIFE
PEOPLE What kind of people should you begin to associate with? “Show me your friends and I will tell you who you are,” is still true.	What people can you begin to associate with that might give your life a new direction?
PLACES Non-bad habit places to visit. Sometimes a place might be neutral, or even good, but it might occasionally engage in activities that could encourage the wrong kinds of habits in the counselee’s mind and life.	What new and safe places do you need to visit that will minimize problems?
PRACTICES Behavior, way of doing things, new attitude too.	What new habits do you need to develop?

I once listened to a TV debate on a disease. It could have been diabetes or any other disease. I like the way one of the discussants puts his point across. He said, “Your genes load the gun, but it is the environment that pulls the trigger.” I considered it a powerful presentation of the debate between nature and nurture. Genes may predispose a person to a certain disease, and he has no control over this. As long as he can control the environment, however, he may prevent the trigger from ever getting pulled or delay it for a long, long time. He is not totally helpless if he can control certain things in the equation.

Our values and many of our problems are directly linked to the environ-

ment. The environment pulls the trigger to the bent of our lives. Incidentally, there are two factors to the environment: there's the internal environment and the external/outside environment. We can do nothing about the external environment. Daddy may never be there; mom may still continue with her thing; grandma never stops believing that she's the best thing in God's creation under God's heaven; the knucklehead hoodlum in the neighborhood is still running rampant pushing and doing his thing; and the system still has you under its radar as a prime suspect. There's nothing you can do to change any of these, because they are outside your control. You can control only one thing, that is, your inner environment. You can control how you respond and how you process information fed to you from outside. You can decide and choose what line of action to follow. You can be deliberate and intentional about the people and places you spend time with, and practices you engage in with them. Your decisions and choices have led you to this place—this jailhouse; your decisions and choices can again lead you out of this place into a new lifestyle and keep you out of this place.

We Are Creatures of Habit—

This Can Be Good News for Change to Happen

You have probably heard it said that human beings are creatures of habit. That's the way we are wired by nature. We function out of habit whether it is good or bad behavior, good or bad thinking pattern. It is a question of habit. When we do a certain thing again and again it soon becomes a second nature. We often say that the practice has become ingrained, meaning that it is now embedded, deep-rooted or in-built into one's nature. From then on we do it almost unconsciously, without a new decision of the mind, almost like an automaton.

For example, think of typing, playing the keyboard, riding a bike, skateboarding, walking, swimming, or driving a car. When you first begin to learn you concentrate on that one task and you cannot afford to lose your focus, or else you'll miss some steps and fail. You follow the task step by step with full attention. In contrast, as soon as you get a hang of it, you do it almost

without thinking about it. Your fingers just move across the keyboard, you keep your balance on the bike or skateboard, you glide in the pool like you are a fish, and your coordination at the steering is effortless. As complex as it seemed in the beginning, you can now even multitask while performing the same operation. What has changed? Habit. A new habit has been formed; something you were not born with has now become fixated in your being.

Think of a human being as a computer. The computer hardware is what we are by nature; the software is the habit we program on our hardware. What shows on the computer monitor depends on the software that the hardware is programmed with. If you have installed Microsoft 2007, that's what you get on your screen, not Microsoft 2012. Yet, if you update to Microsoft 2012, then that's what you begin to get as soon as the update is effective. A computer can be reprogrammed if you install new software. In like manner, we can change a habit (de-habituate and re-habituate) by eliminating certain factors (people, places, and practices) and installing new factors (people, places and practices) into our lives. We can reprogram our lives by the habits we decide to drop or add.

This habituation capacity is neutral and amoral. It is neither good nor bad. It depends on what is fed or programmed into it. Like we say about computers, garbage in-garbage out, the same is true of humans. We become whatever we put in. You are what you are, because you've lived this way and done things that way for so long that it has become your nature or personality; that's not how you were born, however.

You were born with a neutral habituation capacity—for whatever you decide to do or be. Nature provides the hardware; you supply the software. Nature has endowed and equipped us with the innate ability to formulate habits and then function out of those formulated habits.

Unfortunately, many people short-circuit their Christian growth when they capitulate and make excuses for their anger, foul talk, irrationality, addiction, or impatience by saying, "That's the way God made me!" or "That's who I am by nature and I can't help it!" No, that's not the way God made you. That's the way you've lived over the years and made a habit of it. We can say

that's the way you've learned to cope with life and formed a habit of it that it now becomes your default pattern of thinking and behaving. That's the result of the software you programmed on the hardware God and nature supplied you at birth.

As mentioned above, three factors are important in habituation, de-habituation, and re-habituation processes. As we have emphasized the three facilitating factors that influence habituation are: people, places, and practices. These are the three factors that shape your life. They can function as seething factors to be eliminated or as favoring factors to be encouraged. You are what you are because of the people you associate with, the places you visit and the practices you indulge in. Any meaningful change must involve these three.

First, negative people and wrong associations must be eliminated. The saying is true, "Show me your friends and I will tell you who you are." The places with a negative reputation that you visit that can get you into trouble must be eliminated. It is not only with whom you hang out but where you hang out as well that tell a lot about your personality. Lastly, the unwholesome practices that you know are not helpful must be eliminated. It is not just enough to delete these negative things; we must add the positive or pick up new habits, because we cannot be neutral. Positive, wholesome associations (people), healthy places and exemplary practices must replace the old. You cannot talk about change or a new habit until you change your friends (people), the places you go and the things you do (practices).

Sometimes, a place, person or practice may not necessarily be evil in their essence to everybody on the planet, but if they are associated with a negative past in a person's mind such place, person or practice can become triggers; they have to be eliminated. Otherwise, what appears normal and amoral may lead to a downward spiral because of the memories and practices they conjure up. For example, many churches avoid using real wine for communion services, because their members who are struggling with alcoholism may experience some triggers if they sniff wine or gaze at the sparkling bubbles. Some patients in recovery who thought they were making progress in their

narcotics addiction have been lured back into such a life after their physician carelessly prescribed a drug (in the same family of their drug of addiction) that eventually activated and elicited the old passions, leading to a relapse.

HABITUATION

It Is the Way We Are Wired by Nature to Function

Most of our life, good habit and bad habits, have to do with habituation. It is a good thing, because it makes life and living easier. After we acquire the habit by practice, we are able to perform complicated tasks without being preoccupied with going through steps A, B, C and D in order, like an amateur, as we did at the beginning. We just do it, almost thoughtlessly. For example, I drove to work today without consciously thinking when to turn the steering or apply the brakes. I just did it—at the right time and place. A student-driver might brake abruptly, steer too far or too close, over concentrate on the road, or drive erratically. Always remember that in most of life issues we are actually dealing with an habituation process, whether it is an habituation in behavior externally or internally, that is, thinking process.

De-habituation and Re-habituation

(or Uninstalling and Reprogramming)

Just as the old habit was acquired by practice and doing it again and again, the new habit will take root in like manner, by practicing again and again. Re-habituation or reprogramming will take place through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, personal determination or godly self-discipline, the ministry of the Word and daily prayers, fellowship with people of like mind who are also pursuing change and transformation by God's grace, practice, practice, practice... and some more practice in godliness or godly thinking and living.

“Have nothing to do with godless and silly myths. Train yourself in godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come,” (1 Tim. 4:7-8; RSV; emphasis added).

Which Dog Do You Feed the Most?

A young Christian approached an elderly Indian church leader about overcoming temptation. “It is like I have two dogs living within me,” said the new Christian. “One is a good dog and the other is a bad dog. The good dog encourages me to do the right thing, but the bad dog keeps barking at me to do the wrong thing. Both dogs demand my attention at every major step. What do I do?” The Indian Christian leader then asked him, “Which dog do you feed most of the time?” The new Christian was silent for a while. After a pause and reflection, he answered, “I guess it is the one I feed most that wins most of the time.”

We all have those two animals in us. It is the animal that you feed that gets stronger and wins. If you read immoral materials, watch immoral movies, keep company with immoral places and people; guess which dog will win your moral battles? If you read and even memorize scriptures, spend time in prayer to God for help, associate with believers; guess which dog is likely to win?

What if I Fail?

Of course, you’ll fail, again and again and again in your journey of transformation. Everybody does, but there’s forgiveness and mercy in the Father’s house. When a woman becomes pregnant, she craves for certain things, especially foods, she never had cravings for before. In like manner when you are “in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:17) and “Christ [is] in you,” (Col. 1:27) God places within you new desires and appetites. Your new nature craves fellowship with God and desires to please God in all things. This new craving is the reason why we can no longer sin and enjoy it or feel comfortable in it. Sin, or going back into addiction, causes internal struggle for the Christian, because two natures are now in conflict. This reminds me of a popular church chorus when I newly gave my life to Christ. It goes like this: “Things are different now, Something happened to me, When I gave my life to Jesus. Things I loved before, Have passed away; Things I loved far more, Have come to stay. Things are different now...”

In Galatians 5:16, the apostle Paul writes, “Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” Please read Paul’s injunction again. Notice it does not say, “Stop fulfilling the lust of the flesh and then you will walk in the Spirit.” Reading it the other way around, which is the way many tend to understand the passage, places emphasis on the individual’s will power. It simply says, “Walk in the Spirit,” and the consequence of that spiritual mindset is that “you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” The desire may still be present but there’s a greater power—the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit of Christ—that enables you not to “fulfill the lust of the flesh.” Some people fail forward, because they don’t stay down; they pick themselves up and continue with their godly pursuit. Unfortunately, some others fail backward, because they lose heart, lose hope, give up and eventually quit in their pursuit. Failing forward or backward depends on the state of one’s mind in response to an event.

There is a difference between falling into sin and living in sin. A fish lives in water; a man lives on land. Therefore, the fish feels at home in a puddle. A person who falls into a puddle attempts to get out as fast as possible, because that’s not home for him. In like manner, a transformed person or one on the journey of transformation does not sin as a life style; he or she sins as a misstep, as an error of judgment, a weakness of character in a tough situation and is eager to confess, repent and move on. One of the lessons I have tried to impress on young people is that failure is a part of life, a necessary part of the learning process. Failure is a sign that you are trying to learn, to grow, to change. Failure is an indication that you are taking risks and maturing.

For example, you can walk and run today, because you took some risks as a baby or toddler. You imitated the adults around you and attempted to walk as they did. You fell and hurt yourself several times, but you refused to give up. Soon, you began to fall and stumble less and less and less till you can no longer remember when last you fell while walking. What happened? You’ve mastered the game. Your repeated failures as a toddler did not label you as one who would never be able to walk. The fact that you did not give up when you failed and fell resulted in your mastery of the art of walking. In a sense, you

failed your way to success; you failed forward.

Think also of the sport of baseball or basketball. The best baseball or basketball players accept failure as part of the game. They are pros and stars, because they fail less often, not because they do not fail. Failure, not perfection, is the expected thing. These masters of the sports miss fewer shots than others because of practice, practice, and practice to gain mastery. Yet, they still miss their shots, sometimes at the most crucial part of the game. When they fumble and disappoint their fans, they are still no less professionals and stars of the game. It is the same with you. Here is the good news when we falter or fall short in our journey of spiritual transformation: it is still within the Family—“we have an Advocate with the Father” (1 Jn. 2:1f). Our Advocate is with the Father, not with the Judge, because God treats our case as a family matter.

MARY MAGDALENE

An Example of Deliverance, Staying Delivered, and Symbol of Hope for Others

It is not where you came from but where you are going. Not what or who you were but what or who you are now. It is not about history but about the present and future—the present dictates the future. It is not what had been in my foolishness but what will be by the grace of God. My premise for using the story of Mary Magdalene is that addiction, any addiction, can only be “as bad as” but can rarely be “worse than” demonic possession by seven demons! If Jesus could set Mary Magdalene free of her demons, then the same Jesus can, as well, deliver you from your addiction.

Mary Magdalene, a Woman with a Dark Past

Believe it or not, Mary Magdalene was delivered from seven demons (Luke 8:2). She also became the first person to whom the resurrected Christ appeared (Mark 16:9).

“And certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities—Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons... (Luke 8:2)

He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons,” (Mark 16:9b).

She was a woman with a dark past. We have no idea the kind of demons she was possessed with—lying demons, fornicating demons, witchcraft demons, adulterous demons, or murderous demons, whatever. We have no idea how she opened herself up to these demons and became possessed. Was it ancestral, or did she dabble into the occult, or was it any habit that was the gateway for these demons? We don't know. The important thing was her deliverance. Jesus set her free and whom the Son sets free is free indeed (John 8:36). She could have been delivered of seven literal demons, one, two, three, four, etc., or, it could mean complete or total deliverance. The number seven in Scripture is a number for perfection or completion.

Most inmates readily admit and confess that they are battling with some inner demons. The good news is that whatever inner demons you battle with—demons of crimes, demons of sexual assault or sexual abuse, demons of drugs abuse, demons of witchcraft, or demons of deception, you can experience deliverance. The same Jesus who delivered Mary can (and will) set you free if you let Him. If you have been delivered from some demons or demonic oppression, my question is: how are you expressing your gratitude for your deliverance? Let Mary Magdalene be your inspiration and example.

Mary Magdalene Was Always in the Company of Other Women Who Loved Christ and Were Serving Christ

This may be the secret to her staying delivered. She was always mentioned in company of other ladies in all the gospels and she was often mentioned first, like the leader of the group; always being singled out. She was never

referred to as “the other Mary,” as others were. Read Matthew 27:55, 56, 61, 28:1; Mark 15:47, 16:1; Luke 8:1-3, 24:9, 10. When you leave the jail, the person who will welcome you with open hands is your buddy in crime or buddy with criminal tendencies. He or she will be excited to see you and welcome you back. “I miss you. Come on in. My house is your house,” he’ll say. That’s a trap back into the old ways. Those persons who will welcome you with caution, or even with suspicion, are the very persons you need. You’ve got to earn their trust, however. You know and they know that you were a player, a con artist; you’ve played the game all your life. Don’t expect them to immediately trust you. You’ve got to prove yourself. You’ve got to earn their trust by your consistency and determination to hang in there. They won’t leave their wives or their daughters or their money alone with you. I won’t. Don’t blame them. Because they are very suspicious of you does not mean they are not interested in helping you. They are just being smart and watching. Are you going to wait and earn their trust or are you going to get back to your partner in crime who has spread a red-carpet reception for you? It’s your choice.

Mary Magdalene, a Woman Who Ministered to Jesus (Luke 8:2, 3)

Mary Magdalene became a Jesus-supporter. She was named among the “many others who provided for Him [Jesus] from their substance,” (Luke 8:3d). She not only followed Jesus, she contributed to Jesus’ support. Her faith touched her pocketbook. Many inmates have the “gimme, gimme” type of faith; always with a stretched-out hand. Mary Magdalene had a “how may I serve” faith. Jesus says, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Jesus and His disciples had their needs met because of women like Mary Magdalene. Jesus never performed a miracle to meet His or His disciples’ needs for food, clothing, and shelter. They—Jesus and His Disciples—depended on and were sustained from day to day by the generosity and hospitality of families, friends, men and women like Mary Magdalene. (The closest miracle Jesus ever did for personal need was the coin in the mouth of the fish to pay for His and Peter’s Temple tax—Matt. 17:24-27). God is

a Giver; the greatest Giver; a lavish (and senseless) Giver. If we are like our heavenly Father, we'll be givers. There is no growing or maturing Christian that's miserly to God or tight-fisted to people. When you are a loving and giving person, you are more like God. Mary Magdalene was a giver.

Mary Magdalene, a Consistent and Faithful Follower

From the time of her deliverance, Mary Magdalene did not lose sight of Jesus.

- She was at the foot of the cross beholding the crucified Savior suffer and die (Matt. 27:55, 56; Mark 15:40, 41). When the 12 disciples went into hiding, Mary Magdalene was at the foot of the cross, groaning as she watched the Savior die. “And many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were there looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene...” She was consistent.
- She followed Jesus’ body to the tomb (Matt. 27:61; Mark 15:47). “And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the tomb... And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses observed where He [Jesus] was laid.” (Matt. 27:61; Mark 15:47).
- She visited Jesus’ tomb immediately after the Sabbath with other women (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1-8). “Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him,” (Mark 16:1). Death does not end love; true love is stronger than death (Song of Songs 8:6). These women’s love for Jesus was not “till death do us part.” How strong is your love for Jesus? Is it until your prison bid comes to an end? Is it until your release?
- She told the disciples of the resurrected Jesus (Jn. 20:1, 2; Luke 24:9-11; Matt. 28:7-9). “Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Then she ran

and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, and said to them, ‘They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him...’ Then they returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles,” (John 20:1, 2; Luke 24:9-10). These women did not have titles.

They were insignificant in the culture, but they made history.

- She saw the risen, resurrected Lord (Matt. 28:1, 9, 10). “Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb... And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, ‘Rejoice!’ So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him,” vv. 1, 9.
- She’s credited to be the first to see Jesus after His resurrection (Mk. 16:9; Jn. 20:11-18). “Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons,” (Mk. 16:9).

Mary Magdalene, a Woman Who Inspires Hope in Us Today and Challenges Our Service

She did not look back after meeting Jesus. She portrays for us hope. She is a testimony to the reality of a new life. She is a living proof of the hope in a new identity. It is not what had happened to you but what you’ve become and what you are doing with your pain. Mary Magdalene challenges us to be:

- Grateful, and serve the Lord out of gratitude for our salvation and deliverance
- Consistent and faithful, and to keep company with others who do the same
- Generous, and always look for opportunity to give and be a blessing
- Busy for the Lord
- In the company of those who love and serve the Lord.

PRAYER OF DELIVERANCE

Go to a place where you can be quiet and alone with God. Make sure you check the corresponding supporting verses in the Bible later. Pray this prayer, out loud:

Supporting Verses

- Lord Jesus,
- My resurrected Lord and Savior (Matt. 28:5-7)
- I thank You for paying the penalty for my sins
- By Your death and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3-10)
- I thank you for saving my soul
- Not by any good works that I have done
- But by your kindness and grace (Eph. 2:8-10)
- I also acknowledge
- That Your victory over the grave, hell and Satan (1 Cor. 15:45-58)
- Was not for You but was for me
- You did it for me, Lord (Rom. 5:12-21)
- You defeated the enemy for me (Eph. 1:22, 23)
- You overcame Satan and the grave for me
- That I may no longer be
- Under the dominion of the enemy (Heb. 2:14-18)
- I come to You today
- Trusting in Your almighty power to save and deliver (1 Jn. 4:4)
- I acknowledge and confess my sins and addictions today
- I seek You Lord, today
- I seek the same power
- That delivered Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2)
- Of her seven demons
- To do the same for me, today
- Deliver me Lord
- From all demonic influences and deadly habits in my life (Col. 1:13)
- In the name of Jesus, I take authority (Luke 10:19)

Theme: Biblical Pathway to Overcoming Addictions/Recovery of Soul

- Overall unclean spirits
- That battle for the control of my soul
- In the name of Jesus
- I bind all demonic activities over my life (Matt. 18:18)
- Today, in Jesus' Name, I break the bondage of (name the addiction)
- Over my life—spirit, soul, and body
- In the name of Jesus, I command you
- Satan, (name the addiction), loose your hold over my life
- Take off your hand from all that concerns me
- In the name of Jesus
- Today, I proclaim my liberty and freedom (Gal. 5:1)
- From all demonic oppression and bondage to substances
- Today, in the name of Jesus
- All demonic harassments in my life come to an end
- In the name of Jesus and by His power
- Today, I am set free
- According to the Scriptures
- Anyone the Son sets free
- Is free indeed (Jn. 8:36)
- I declare that I am free indeed
- On the authority of God's Word
- I seal this prayer and my deliverance
- In the Blood of Jesus (Rev. 12:11)
- I plead the Blood of Jesus
- Over my spirit, soul, and body
- I seal this prayer and my deliverance
- In the Name of Jesus
- The name that is above all names
- For at the name of Jesus
- Every knee must bow
- Of things in heaven and on earth

Teach Them

- And under the earth (Phil. 2:9-11)
- Satan, (name the addiction), I command you to bow
- Satan, you bow and fall now
- To the power of Christ
- Satan, you are a liar (Jn. 8:44)
- You've been exposed
- You are a defeated foe
- You are a toothless lion (1 Pet. 5:8, 9)
- In the name of Jesus
- I walk in freedom
- From now on
- Amen and Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION/ MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

DAY 17

1. Although Whyme and Blooper were born to the same parents and raised under similar environment the two siblings took divergent pathways in life. Whyme dropped out of school and was in a gang, but Blooper continued in school and hoped to go to college and was not into gangs. Why is the difference or what is responsible for the two to part ways early in life?
2. Do you find it strange that the favorite place where Whyme hangs out is smack-dab in the middle of Church Street—a street lined by different vibrant, big and small local churches? Explain why you find it strange—if you do, or why you don't.
3. Reformation versus transformation. Match column A to column B by drawing lines across to the correct definition/explanation.

COLUMN A	COLUMN B
I. Reformation is	1. Biblical change brought about by the Holy Spirit in the human heart; it is a change from inside out; results in a change of direction
II. Transformation is	2. External conformity, sometimes to avoid punishment or obtain a reward; it is like rearranging the furniture, nothing really has changed in the belief system
III. Transformation is DAY 17	3. The human attempt to change behavior or attitude; it is working from the outside; Character Education and City Hall programs of citizenship qualities will fall under this
IV. Reformation is	4. Often described as “conversion,” “born again,” “born from above,” “new birth,” “regeneration,” or “godly repentance.”
V. Reformation is	5. Righteousness that springs from “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” Col.1:27b; ex. Christ-confident, as Paul was, says, “I encountered Jesus; ‘no longer I that lives but Christ lives in me.’” Gal. 2:20a
VI. Transformation is	6. Righteousness that springs from human efforts, self-will and self-discipline; ex. Determined to never return to prison, says, “Prison is not a good place, I’m not coming back here for any reason.”

4. Read Ephesians 4:20-28 to answer the following questions.
 - a. What were the Ephesians asked to put off? See verse 22. Why?
 - b. If Paul were to write you a personal letter today, what would he ask

you to “put off, concerning your former conduct” verse 22? Why?

c. What does Paul mean by “renewed in the spirit of your mind” in verse 23?

d. Paul enjoined the Romans to do the same in Romans 12:1-2. “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And **DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD, BUT BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND**, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God,” (Romans 12:1-2; emphasis added). Why is this important to change or transformation?

e. How do we renew our minds?

f. What were the Ephesians asked to put on in verse 24? Why? What would Paul be asking you to put on today? Why?

g. See another “put on” injunction of Paul in Romans 13:8 “But **PUT ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST**, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts,” (Romans 13:14; emphasis added). “Clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ,” (NIV); “Dress yourself in Christ,” (MSG). How do we “wear” Christ or “be dressed up in” Christ? What will your day look like if you were adorned from head to toe in Christ?

5. Read Ephesians 6:10-18. What other “put on” and “put off” admonitions did Paul give?

a. Who/what does Paul want the believers in Rome to put on? (13:14) and what is Paul’s reason for this “put on” admonition to the Romans in 13:14?

b. What does Paul ask the Ephesian Christians to put on (see verse 11) and what is behind Paul’s imperatives to the Ephesians to “put on” in Ephesians 6?

c. Why do we need to “put off” certain things before we can “put on” another set of habits?

d. What do you need to “put off” and what do you need to “put on” to be a truly new person?

6. There are three important facilitators of change and three important inhibitors of change. Until these three are altered no change is possible. These three factors are PEOPLE, PLACES and PRACTICES. What factors in the process of change, de-habituation, re-habituation, and change of thinking need to be eliminated or acquired? Complete the table below by identifying some action plans:

SEETHING FACTORS TO BE ELIMINATED (The Put Off).	MY ACTION PLAN FOR VICTORY, BABY STEPS TOWARDS MY GOAL OF NEW LIFE
<p>PEOPLE. What people have put you in most troubles? That is, associates. Bad companies corrupt good morals – 1 Cor. 15:33. A man tends to drift towards the values of his associates.</p> <p>PLACES. What places have resulted in great problems for you? What kind of places do you frequent?</p>	
<p>PRACTICES. What habits have led you to this place? What kind of practices do you engage in? What kind of reading materials, movies, sports, games, TV programming, etc.?</p>	
<p>FAVORING FACTORS TO BE ENCOURAGED (The Put On)</p>	<p>MY ACTION PLAN FOR VICTORY, BABY STEPS TOWARDS MY GOAL OF NEW LIFE</p>

<p>PEOPLE. What kind of people should you begin to associate with? “Show me your friends and I will tell you who you are,” is still true.</p>	<p>What people can you begin to associate with that might give your life a new direction?</p>
<p>PLACES. Non-bad habit places to visit. Sometimes a place might be neutral, or even good, but it might occasionally engage in activities that could encourage the wrong kinds of habits in the counselee’s mind and life.</p>	<p>What new and safe places do you need to visit that will minimize problems?</p>
<p>PRACTICES. Behavior, way of doing things, new attitude too.</p>	<p>What new habits do you need to develop?</p>

7. Of the three-factor process: CONVICTION, CONVERSION and COMMITMENT, which one is your greatest challenge or weakest point? Explain.
8. How can you fortify yourself and become stronger in this weak spot of yours?
9. How is the phrase, “under the influence” and Paul’s charge to the Ephesians to “be filled with the Spirit” rather than “be drunk with wine” (Eph. 5:18) helpful in understanding an addiction and recovery from it in a biblical sense? See also Paul’s similar charge to the Galatians to “walk in the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16-26; esp. v. 16).
10. Let’s look again at the put-off/put-on injunctions of Paul’s writings (Eph. 4:25-28; See also Col. 3:8-14). Paul gives some practical advice and the fruit or signs of true change.
 - a. When is a liar no longer a liar (according to Paul in Eph. 4:25)? When can society no longer give him the label of a liar? Is it when he stops lying (the

put off)? When he starts telling the truth (the put on)? Explain.

b. What kind of change in thinking will facilitate this process?

c. When is a thief no longer a thief (according to Paul Eph. 4:28)? When can society no longer call him a thief? Is it when he stops stealing (the put off)? When he starts doing the right thing, when he starts giving (the put on) instead of taking—the very opposite of what he used to do? Explain this as it relates to biblical change.

d. What kind of change in thinking is required to achieve this?

e. By extension, when is a door no longer a door? Is it when the hinge is loosed, and the door is taken off and removed from the passageway? Or, when the wood/steel that makes up the door is converted or reshaped into something else? (Also, when is a television no longer a television? Is it when it breaks down and nonfunctional or when its parts are melted or recycled and used for something else? When does it – or its scraps – lose its identity to be called a television?) Discuss this in relation to biblical change.

f. When will an ex-convict cease to be called or labeled an ex-convict? Is it when he leaves jail, gets a job and an apartment of his own, volunteers in neighborhood events, or when he consistently lives a life that's the very opposite of what led him to jail?

11. Read Acts 8:9-25, the story of Simon in Samaria, and answer the following questions.

a. a) What is sorcery? Read verse 9 and define or explain sorcery. b) What kind of person was he if Simon was described as one who “practiced sorcery”? See verse 9 again.

b. a) What was Simon's “previous” way of life, business, or spiritual association? b) What was his reputation in the city of Samaria? Read verses 9-11. Explain how deep Simon's spiritual impact/influence was on the city. c) According to public record, did he stop practicing sorcery? (For example, in Acts 19:18-20 we read that the Ephesian Christian converts “who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all.”)

c. What difference did the residents of Samaria notice in Simon's per-

- formance and Phillip's ministry that made the people turn to Phillip's message (and no longer follow Simon)?
- d. a) If any, what is the difference between the Simon we read about in verse 13 and the Simon we read about in verses 18 and 19? b) If any, discuss where we see Simon in his true, authentic self.
 - e. a) From Peter's response to Simon in verses 20-23, would you say that the Apostle Peter was too harsh on a new convert, a "babe in Christ" who did not know any better or would you say that the apostle Peter knew he was dealing with an unconverted man (verses 21, 23), – a man who was still of the same old sorcerous heart condition? Explain your answer. b) In your own opinion, couldn't the Apostles have handled the case in a gentler, kinder manner? Explain your answer. [For further study: Read Acts 5:1-11 to see how Apostle Peter handled Ananias and Sapphira's case.]
 - f. In what ways does Simon's life story help to explain or illustrate the "Reformation versus Transformation" theme of the chapter? Explain why you think that Simon, in this case study, experienced transformation or reformation or a relapse/misstep in his transformation?
 - g. From what we read in verses 14-17 about the Holy Spirit, why is the Holy Spirit indispensable to the Christian life? Why did the Apostles Peter and John, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, have to go to Samaria to pray for the new believers to receive the Holy Spirit?
 - h. **FOOD FOR THOUGHT:** From the case study, how will you ensure that you are experiencing spiritual transformation and not mere circumstantial reformation? Where do you see yourself in this story?
12. Why do you think Mary Magdalene, who was formerly possessed of seven demons, is a good case study on getting free of addiction?
 13. Why is it so important as the prerequisite starting point for overcoming addiction, to have a new mental picture of yourself and a changed self-talk or inner conversation from negative to positive?
 14. Explain Jesus' parable of "old cloth-new cloth"/"old wine-new wine" in the light of Albert Einstein's often-quoted concept, "We can't solve

problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”

15. How is your story in any way like the limited worldview of the story of the frog that lives in the farmer’s pond and assumes the pond is all the world there is, not being aware of seas, and oceans and big lakes in other parts of the world, because he’s never been curious enough or taken the risk to explore?
16. Read Acts 19:11-20 and answer the following questions: a) In verses 13-16, why were the seven sons of the high priest unsuccessful in casting the demon out even from the demon-possessed though they used the name of Jesus and followed Paul’s successful example? b) In verses 17-20, what did those Christians with an ugly past in Ephesus do that strongly testified to the genuineness of their conversion and what lessons can we learn from them?
17. Read Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s poem: **“Tis The Set of The Sail”** (below) and discuss it in light of Whyme and Blooper and how one ship can travel East, and another West propelled by the force of the same wind:

‘Tis The Set of The Sail poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox (Nov. 5, 1850 – Oct. 30, 1919; American author and poet)

One ship sails East,
And another West,
By the self-same winds that blow,
‘Tis the set of the sails
And not the gales,
That tells the way we go.
Like the winds of the sea
Are the waves of time,
As we journey along through life,
‘Tis the set of the soul,
That determines the goal,
And not the calm or the strife.

Ministering to Inmates During a Yearlong Pandemic Lockdown

I tried to attend to the spiritual needs of Protestant inmates, especially those on my call out, during the yearlong Covid-19 global pandemic lockdown. Unlike churches in the society, we could not hold remote services on Zoom or by any other online method. The printed word through the in-house mailing system became the only alternative. I made sure they got something from me in the mail every week. It could be devotionals, such as *Our Daily Bread*, donated books and magazines, a study guide, a printed sermon from the archives, like one I preached in the past five years, and monthly bulletins. Here are two monthly bulletins I mailed to the inmates during the global lockdown.

Chapter 6, *The Three Enemies of the Christian*, and chapter 9b, *The Dinner Invitation from the Risen Lord and King*, were also materials mailed to Protestant inmates on my call out during the pandemic. Happily, my mailing list shrunk considerably compared to the beginning of the pandemic. This was good news. It meant many inmates were being released from jail and going back home to family and friends.

I received encouraging letters and comments from Protestant inmates on my mailing list who received regularly from me during this period. Especially noteworthy were letters from inmates who had been transferred to our facility during the global pandemic when there were no gatherings. They had therefore never met me in person and were never in my Sunday services. They were grateful for the regular pastoral “epistles” they received from me. Some commented that they had never experienced such in all the jails they’d been housed in before. I replied that the pandemic itself was the dawn of a new era for all of us which no one saw coming and was therefore least prepared against.

Truth Seekers in an Era of a Plethora of Lying Spirits³⁴ or, Decoding the Year 2021 and Beyond

WARNING: What you about to read is raw and may be uncomfortable for some. Nonetheless, I care about you too much to lie to you or support the system of lies that led to your incarceration. If you do not want to receive any mail from me, write me to take you off my mailing list.

As I reflected over the year 2020 and all the new vocabularies, phrases, inventions, and new realities that came with it, I came up with an unending list. It included the following: Covid-19 pandemic, lockdowns, vaccines, food lines, relief funds, unemployment, quarantine, face masks, social distancing, ventilators, personal protection equipment (PPE), over-tasked healthcare system, thousands of deaths here in the US and millions of deaths worldwide due to the pandemic, remote learning, Zoom weddings and Zoom funeral services, telemedicine, rapid testing, Black Lives Matter Movement, US November 3rd presidential election, and debates over the results thereafter, etc. Sadly, I couldn't breathe a sigh of relief even though the year 2020 had come to an end. I wondered why I still couldn't be relaxed. It then dawned on me that, behind it all, there had been a greater bedrock problem, an underlying factor, that had gone undetected and had therefore not been given a due attention. Whilst the pandemic was the problem the world was dealing with and fussing over, this bedrock problem, to me, was the backbone and the very fuel of the pandemic, as well as the contributing factor to all other problems that came with 2020.

“What's this foundational, bedrock problem that fueled the pandemic?” you ask. It is a lying spirit, lying tongue or deceitful tongue. Yes, LYING SPIRIT. In the past lying could go undetected for a while, but in 2020 lying was out in the open. It was unashamed to go public. Swallowing the bait of lies hook, line and sinker became the new normal. It was mass hysteria and

34. “Truth Seekers in an Era of a Plethora of Lying Spirits, or, Decoding the Year 2021 and Beyond” was January 2021 Bulletin, mailed to Protestant inmates on my call out because of the prolonged Covid-19 lockdown. “The Parable of the Long Interstate Train Ride” was distributed as my February 2021 Bulletin.

anyone who was not caught up in the web of lies was looked upon with suspicion. People who believed the truth were the outsiders. If you recall, a lying spirit was behind the Covid-19 from its very onset, from when it was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. As the virus moved from country to country, everything about it continued to be shrouded in lies and secrecy. The lying spirit had been behind the conspiracy theories surrounding the vaccines from every angle. Yes, the lying spirit was the backbone of the alternative truths and conspiracy theories over the result of the November 3 US presidential election. This culminated, sadly, in the disgraceful event that happened on a symbolic and historic day in the US, Wednesday, January 6, 2021. This has become one of the darkest days of America. (You bet I won't describe or talk about that day beyond this.).

In 1998, when I was a chaplain intern in Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center during my Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) we had a didactic (a lesson or seminar) by a professional in the healthcare sector. The expert told us then that the greatest threat that could wipe out a large population of the world was not going to be cancer—as deadly as cancer was—but a flu-like airborne virus. As the corona virus was becoming a real threat leading to the lockdowns in March and April 2020, I remembered what the medical intellectual had told us. After a year of witnessing the untold devastation of the virus worldwide, I wish I could have an audience with that medical expert. I would have told him that he was partially right, and partially wrong. He was right that a flu-like virus had the potential for wiping out a large population, but he was wrong in saying that it was the greatest threat. The greatest threat to humanity is conspiracy theory. Lies, lies and bundles of lies from every sector. It is common knowledge that the corona virus pandemic couldn't have wreaked as much havoc without the underlying factor of lies, lies and lies.

Somebody please pinch me: how could humans be so gullible, naïve, and credulous to swallow those lies? Could it be that humanity desperately needed something to chant or believe, or a leader to follow, that humanity would reach and grasp anything and be enchanted by any leader? Could it be that these baseless lies were so appealing, because they first appealed to the

basal and beastly parts of our being, and, if that's the case, are we that basal and beastly? Is this what the information age and information technology are about? With a Smartphone in hand every Dick and Harry is an audio/video cameraman, a worldwide reporter, instantaneous global life broadcaster, key witness, influencer, and, may I say, also a peddler of a slanted truth, if not an outright lie.

In the year 2020, if the tangible furniture and gadgets in a room could figuratively represent the pandemic, then, metaphorically, the lying spirit was the air in the room—the intangible and invisible air which we unavoidably breathed in though it was suffocating us.

The Power of Lying Spirits

The lying spirit is powerful. I'm not a prophet, but I'm sometimes endowed with the sixth sense. If you ask for my insight into the new year, I will say the greatest threat we face in 2021 is the power of the lying spirit, or a conspiracy theory, to initiate and/or fuel any crisis. This could be simply stoking the flames of any real or presumed impending disaster in any arena such as, political, economic, climatic, technological, biological, or health. Who is behind lying spirits? Who else but Satan! The Bible says of Satan, "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it." (John 8:44; emphasis mine). In the beginning of creation, Satan, the father of lies, lied to, and deceived, Eve to doubt, reject and disregard God's instructions (Gen. 3:1-13). Eve thereby rebelled against God. In the Scripture, "A lying tongue" and its next of kin, "a false witness who speaks lies" both made it into the list of "six things the Lord hates, yes, seven things that are an abomination to Him" (Prov. 6:16-19).

The writer of Proverbs, wrote, "Buy the truth, and do not sell it, also wisdom and instruction and understanding," (Prov. 23:23). Notice, he did not say "buy truth", but he said, "buy the truth;" with the definite article, "the." Truth is a definite entity; a Person, if you like. In the Apostle Paul's list of the full armor of our warfare in Ephesians 6:10-18, he mentioned

first “Truth” and he likened it to the soldier’s belt or waste band (v. 14). The belt, Truth, serves as a harness for other weapons, as well as facilitating speed, agility and movement. Without “truth” as his belt the Christian soldier has little or no coordination, and he could very well be fighting a wrong battle. Jesus said, “I am... the Truth,” (Jn. 14:6), and the Holy Spirit is “the Spirit of Truth,” (Jn. 14:17). Jesus prayed for His disciples, “Sanctify them in Your truth. Your [God’s] word is Truth,” (John 17:17, 19). The gospel is “the Truth,” (Gal. 2:5, 14). Jesus said to the Jews who had believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free,” (Jn. 8:31, 32; emphasis mine). In his prologue to his Gospel, the Apostle John wrote, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” He continued his prologue by saying that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” (Jn. 1:1, 14a), referring to the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Satan thrives in telling half-truths. If he tells absolute lies, few people will fall for his lies. Nevertheless, there’s always an element of truth in his lies; he just does not tell you everything. He tells the fascinating and attractive side of the story and leaves out the damning portion. The half-truth and the half lie were the way Satan deceived Eve in Genesis 3, and it’s the way he still works best. Many gang and cult members find out too late. Possibly the smartest brains are in US prisons today. They are in jail, because they believe a lie of the devil. Some of you are here today, because you’ve believed a lie and have been living a lie.

You sit in jail today, because the enemy had lied to you, or told you a half-truth, a half-lie. He had told you that you deserved to have “that thing” more than the person who had toiled hard to own it; therefore, you robbed him/her of “that thing.” The enemy whispered to you that you, the macho man, were entitled to the sleek woman’s body; so, you raped her. The enemy lied to you that the credulous, innocent child was a toy for your narcissistic enjoyment; so, you sexually abused and defiled her. The enemy had lied to you that you needed the drugs to feel “high, unbeatable and invincible;” so you began your journey into addiction and penury. The enemy had lied to you that selling

drugs was your way of making quick money, even though you could witness the devastation drugs were bringing to your community; yet, you began your journey into unlicensed pharmaceutical drug deals.

Probably the greatest lie of all was that the enemy inflated your ego, ingenuity, and mastermind. Satan, “the father of lies,” told you that you were a genius and that you were smarter than the rest—that you’re so intelligent you would never be caught or found guilty. You’re convinced you’re so crafty you could beat anything and outsmart any system. That you could disguise and cover your tracks so well that no detective, not even a genie, could find your DNA or fingerprints, and no cameras could capture your face. He had lied to you that you came from the right pedigree, right zip code, right last name, and were well connected, and could get away with anything. Well, as you now know, he lied to you. You bought into the enemy’s lies.

Why is Lying so Successful?

Lies fuel our senselessness, effortlessness, and ego; truth, on the other hand, appeals to our higher senses, work and discipline. By nature, we’d rather do the senseless, go for the easy way out and appease our ego than do otherwise. Conspiracy theories are medicinal for our pathological disorders, because they keep us engaged, moving and functioning, even when it is directionless. A lying tongue might be the most potent weapon in spiritual warfare. In the Old Testament book of Judges chapters 6 and 7, we read of the exploit of Gideon, how he routed and defeated an army of 135,000 soldiers with his 300 God-chosen men. How could that be? The reason was a dreamer and an interpreter of dreams who sowed fear in the people (Judg. 7:9-15). As the whole army of the Midianites yielded to lying tongues and false prophets, fear spread through the ranks like cancer, and they lost the battle.

Read 1 Kings 22:19-23 for the prophet Micaiah’s insight into the influence of lying spirits. In that passage, 1 Kings 22:19-23, to orchestrate the downfall of the evil king Ahab for all the innocent blood he and his wife, Jezebel, had shed to pollute the land, God sought a strategy or strategists among His heavenly beings. According to the prophet Micaiah, the Lord

announced, “Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead?” (v. 20). Many angels brought their ideas until one spoke up and laid out his strategy. He said, “I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets,” (v. 22). To this the Lord said, Bingo! “You shall persuade him, and also prevail. Go out and do so.” (v. 22). The rest was history. All of king Ahab’s 400 palace prophets, unbeknown to them, under the influence of a lying spirit, prophesied in one accord, “Go up, for the Lord will deliver it into the hand of the king,” (v. 6). King Ahab went to the battle, was defeated and died, according to the word of the lone prophet of God.

The deciding factor this year, 2021, as it was in 2020, will be the factor of truth versus lies. How do we survive in an atmosphere of a plethora of lies, lying spirits and deceitful tongues? I’m glad you asked.

The Story: Naked Truth and Dressed Up Lie

In 2000, I participated in the Starting Line program of the Prison Ministry. It was a program that enlisted volunteers for an evangelical outreach to the prisons in Queens, NY. During the training for the volunteers the then Program Coordinator, a master storyteller, told (or retold) the story of the Naked Truth and Dressed Up Lie. I may not recall the morals he drew and the applications and lessons, but I want to retell the story, with my own ending and lessons.

As the story goes, many, many years ago, the Truth and the Lie went for a walk in the forest. (By the way, as it was then, so it is now, that Truth and the Lie travel the same road and often travel together, side by side.) As they journeyed on this day, the two came upon a beautiful, silent body of water. They decided to go for a swim. The Truth and the Lie undressed and dived into the silent lake. Glad to be in the cool water on the sunny and hot afternoon, the Truth swam away from the shore doing the front crawl, breaststroke, backstroke, and butterfly. Rather than dive away, the Lie got out of the lake and put on the Truth’s clothing. The Truth noticed and started swimming back to the shore shouting at the Lie, “That’s my garb; that’s my clothing you are putting on. If you won’t swim, then put back on your own clothing.” However,

the Lie wouldn't listen. The Lie left his own clothing on the shore and made off with the Truth's clothing. Off he started for the village square.

The Truth climbed out of the water. The Truth had a difficult choice. Should he put on Lie's clothing and chase him down or should he run after him butt naked? Truth couldn't imagine himself in Lie's garb, that wouldn't be true of him. Truth chased the Lie, shouting, "Help! Help, hold the thief!" Yet, as always, the Lie was faster, and the Truth couldn't catch up. So, in the nude, Truth chased Lie to the village square where the Lie, in Truth's clothing, was addressing the crowd. The Truth hid behind the bush and yelled to the crowd, "That's not the Truth addressing you. That's the Lie dressed in my clothing; please don't listen to him. He's lying." No body listened. Truth was forced to come out of hiding butt naked. They saw him and he was disgusting. They yelled at him, "Nudity is not allowed in this village. You are disgusting." He tried to explain, "The Lie stole my clothing." They chased the Truth away in disgust and saying, "Duh! You are completely naked! You're disgusting! Go away, go back to the pond, and hide in the water! We don't want to have anything to do with the Naked Truth."

So, the Naked Truth had to withdraw into the forest and spent its time submerged in the pond. The Lie on the other hand, roamed the world dressed up as the Truth, receiving considerable respect and love from the humans. To this day, people still hate naked Truth and embrace the dressed up Lie, that is, Lie masquerading as Truth, clothed in Truth's garb.

Naked Truth and Dressed Up Lie Today

I want to give the story my own ending and draw some lessons. The story ends with Dressed up Lie roaming the streets, unchallenged, posing as the Truth while naked Truth retreated into the wilderness. Three things I want to suggest: first, the scenario is still the case today. Lie, dressed up as the Truth, is to be found in the social media, Internet, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and other news outlets. Therefore, whatever you hear on the streets and social media on politics, sex, prisons, religion, family, business, beauty, or yourself, is most likely, Lie dressed up in Truth's clothing. To find

the Truth, you must look and go somewhere else.

Two, Truth is neither self-effacing nor commonplace. Anyone who wants the Truth must seek and search for him sincerely and whole-heartedly in the wilderness. Absolute Truth is a Person, a Divine Person. Jesus says, “I am... the Truth... You will know the Truth and the Truth will set you free,” (Jn. 14:6; 8:32). However, the casual cannot find the Truth, only the earnest truth-seekers. Truth says, “And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart,” (Jer. 29:13).

Lastly, and this is where it gets muddy. While nudity is not a virtue, Truth is still naked in the wilderness and anyone who seeks the Truth must be willing to become one with the Truth, that is, be naked as well. Anywhere you turn on the street, in the news, and social media, you see and hear Lie, clothed as Truth. To learn or discover Truth, naked Truth, you must wander into the wilderness. Yet, that would not be enough. To embrace Truth, you must become one with the Truth, naked. Only those willing to throw off their undergarment of falsehood, robe of self-righteousness, shoes of arrogance and outer garment of worldliness and run butt naked and unencumbered in search of Truth will find him.

Today, to find the Truth only three things are necessary. First, you need the discernment to understand that what you are bombarded with on the airwaves, online and offline is falsehood, or “fake news.” It’s all Lie dressed up in Truth’s clothing. Secondly, you must desire to go into the wilderness to search for the Truth diligently, because Truth is not self-revealing and only the ardent seekers find him. Lastly, you have to take off your defenses, drop your excuses and pretensions, put away your self-justifications and all other things you have masked yourself with and come just as you are in your birthday suit, vulnerable, transparent, sincere, naked. There and then can you embrace and be embraced by the naked Truth.

3 Major Problems in 2021 and Beyond

We face three major problems in 2021 and beyond. First, Lie is out on the streets clothed in Truth’s outfit and he’s deceiving many who think they are

being fed with the Truth. Turn to social media, television news, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and you can be sure to be bombarded with words that are lies dressed up in truth's attire. That's problem number 1 in 2021.

Problem number two: Out of the brooks, with his clothing stolen, Truth would not put on Lie's outfit because that would not be consistent with his nature. Truth has therefore retreated from social life into the wilderness, butt naked. That puts the onus on anyone seeking Truth to abandon the streets and social media and go into the seclusion of the wilderness, retreat into private study, deep thinking, and meditation. As I said earlier, many of you, if you would be honest with yourselves, you could trace your journey to incarceration to when you started believing as truths what you now know to be lies. Where did you find or hear those lies? You found them on the streets, on street corners, in your circle of friends, from your peers, in family get-togethers, and in school. Now is the time to retreat into the privacy of the wilderness to find Truth about yourself, life, future, and politics.

Problem number 3: Because Truth is butt naked it puts the burden on all Truth seekers to become the same with the Truth, that is, butt naked. Yes, you read rightly—butt naked, as in your birthday suit. Okay, okay, okay! I take that back. You should know I wasn't promoting nudity in any sense. I was speaking philosophically as in taking off all the externals of self-pride, excuse making, rationalization, self-justification, hypocrisy which is often tagged as white lies, bitterness, hatred, rage, lusts, greed, self-righteousness, holier-than-thou attitude, selfishness, childishness, laziness, slothfulness, idleness, lethargy, and complacency, etc., all the lies we tell ourselves!

You know what? No list or checklist will do. Simply do this: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts... be filled with the Spirit... Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh," (Rom. 13:14; Eph. 5:18c; Gal. 5:16b). If you will simply "put on the Lord Jesus Christ... the Way, the Truth and the Life" in 2021, the die is cast, it's going to be a successful and wonderful year.

Why Did Jesus Speak in Parables?

“And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.” (Mark 4:33, 34; emphasis mine).

Parables conceal truths. Life itself is like a parable; it is a short, simple story that illustrates something grander, bigger and more profound than itself. To the rest of the world, Jesus’ words were riddles but to His disciples who retreated into a place of solitude with Him, Jesus explained the parables. The Scripture says, “And when they were alone [with Jesus], He explained all things to His disciples,” (4:34b; insert, mine)—“alone,” as in privacy, or exclusive of all forms of distractions. The parables and riddles of life are made plain, not on the streets, synagogues, or study halls, but in the time of one-on-one, solitude, or, as our story brings it out, in the wilderness. Providing clarity and in-depth in seclusion to the inquisitive and curious few was clearly the pattern. Earlier, in Mark 4:10, 11, we read, “But when He [Jesus] was ALONE, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. And He said to them, ‘To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables.’” (emphasis mine.)

Why did Jesus speak in parables? Maybe it was for the same reason that Truth was no longer in the open market. If Truth came to town and people could not kill or distort the Truth, then they’d chase it back into the wilderness. Truth is on the endangered list; it is vulnerable and susceptible to extinction. Therefore, Truth must be guarded and protected. Just imagine what the crowd did to Jesus, the Truth personified. They crucified Jesus! They released Barabbas, the murderer and insurrectionist to the streets of the city and they dragged out and hanged, “the Way, the Truth and the Life” on the cross on the outskirts of the city (Mark 15:7-15; Acts 3:14, 15).

Jesus spoke in parables, because Truth is not easily grasped; it is not for the casual, lackadaisical, or the result of a happenstance. Truth had retreated into the wilderness and only those who abandoned the city and pursued the Truth into the wilds and deserts would find him. Only those who would take

time to think deeply, reflect and ruminate a little longer, and dive in a little deeper would find Truth. Truth is not on the surface; it is buried deep, deep down and could be unearthed only by some effort. Truth is not periphery or ephemeral; it is lasting and eternal. Truth is holy and precious. Jesus warned in another place, “Do not give what is holy [is it okay if I substitute the Truth?] to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine; lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces,” and, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Matt. 7:6; 11:15; insert mine).

Eternal Words to Live by in 2021 and Beyond

Search me, O God, and know my heart;

Try me, and know my anxieties;

And see if there is any wicked way in me,

And lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23, 24).

He who covers his sins will not prosper,

But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy. (Proverbs 28:13).

Seek the Lord while He may be found,

Call upon Him while He is near.

Let the wicked forsake his way,

And the unrighteous man his thoughts;

Let him return to the Lord,

And He will have mercy on him;

And to our God,

For He will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:6, 7).

The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I

have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. (John 10:10).

For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5).

Summary

Let's go deeper in Christ this year. Let's be more intimate with Him who is "the Way, the Truth and the Life."

Reflection Questions

1. In honest reflection, how have lies and lying been part of your story and journey to this point and this place?
2. Considering the recent events in our nation, (a) how have lies and lying been a part of, played a major role in or become part and parcel of our national story? (b) how have lies and lying formed, reformed, or deformed our national consciousness? Discuss.
3. Do you agree with the author that lying and conspiracy theories are the greatest threats to our nation/national security? Explain why you agree or disagree.
4. How far will you go in agreeing or disagreeing with the notion that in 2021 and beyond, like in the story, Naked Truth has been driven out of town into the bush, while Dressed up Lie is roaming freely in the streets, dressed in Truth's garment? Discuss.
5. Faced with the challenge that to find the Truth and become one with the Naked Truth one must be naked like the Truth, what does transparency, sincerity or openness mean to you? How would you describe yourself in terms of vulnerability, authenticity, and candidness?
6. Now that Truth has been sent out of town, what are your strategies or plans to search for and find Truth in the secrecy of the wilderness?
7. The author writes, "Conspiracy theories are medicinal for our pathological disorders because they keep us busy, engaged, moving and functioning even when directionless." Unpack that statement.
8. What does "alone with Jesus" mean or suggest to you? Have you ever been alone with God/Jesus? If yes, discuss the experience; if no,

explain the roadblocks.

9. The author says, “Life in itself is a parable; it is a short, simple story that illustrates something grander, bigger and more profound than itself.” What did he mean? What’s the grander and more profound that life, in its brevity and simplicity, illustrates?
10. The author talks about the power of lying and why lying is so powerfully deceptive. What would you like to add to his points on this? How could you buttress the case he was making?

The Parable of the Long Interstate Local Train Ride

(or, The Parable of Incarceration/Parable of a Jail Sentence)

You say, “Chaplain, that’s a cruel and very expensive joke; it’s very insensitive of you referring to jail term as a parable.” Well, it depends on your definition of a parable. A parable is a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson, as told by Jesus in the Gospels, or, “the parable of the blind men and the elephant” which many of us read in school. I’m thinking of how Jesus often likens the unseen, or far-off kingdom in people’s mind, to something they are familiar with, something relatable to them. Jesus’ favorite almost formulaic preface is, “To what shall I liken the kingdom of God. It is like…” and then the parable follows. For example, Jesus asked rhetorically, using the royal plural, we, “To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it?” (Mk. 4:30; also, Lk. 13:20). That got me thinking. Having been on this job for close to a decade, I asked myself, “To what shall I compare this place? To what shall I compare a prison term? What shall I liken it to?”

Is a jail term comparable to...? Do you sometimes feel that your case or fate is likened to...?

1. The teenage Old Testament dreamer, Joseph, who was lied about and thrown into a prison dungeon? Joseph languished in jail until God turned the tide. Read Genesis chapters 37-50.
2. Israelites in captivity and 400 years of slavery to Egypt until Moses became the God-sent deliverer? It took plagues upon plagues, one miracle after another, before God’s *“Let my people go”* became a reality, as well as Israel’s Babylonian captivity and exile leading to the somber lament song, *“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst of it... How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”* (Ps. 137:1, 2, 4)?
3. Jonah’s experience in the belly of the fish? Jonah was running away in the opposite direction from God’s mission, but God intercepted

his trip. God sent a storm that almost capsized his boat. The only remedy was to throw him, the culprit, off the boat into the raging sea. Read Jonah's story in his short book.

4. The three Hebrew children, Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego who were thrown into a fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar, because they would not bow down to worship the king's idol? Read Daniel chapter 3 for their story. A friend of mine who was having some marital problems once described his condition saying it felt like he was in the furnace of fire like Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego.
5. Daniel in the lion's den? Out of envy the other political office holders conspired to get Daniel into trouble. He was so righteous that they couldn't find any fault except to find ways to implicate him for his religious observance. Read Daniel Chapter 6 for the story.
6. Jeremiah thrown into a miry, boggy, deep well in a prison yard, sinking and about to be submerged alive in the marshy, sludgy, swampy slimy soil before deliverance came for him? Read Jeremiah chapter 38.
7. John the Baptist who was imprisoned for preaching righteousness—Matthew 11?
8. Barabbas, on death row in prison, guilty of murder and insurrection, was released and Jesus was the replacement to be crucified? (Matt. 27:16-26; Acts 3:14, 15). Jesus was the scapegoat.
9. Paul and Silas were unjustly thrown into prison after severe flogging in response to an angry mob and deprived of due course in the court of law? Read Acts 16.
10. John, the Beloved Apostle, thrown into exile on the Island of Patmos and left to die? But God visited him and gave him the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation.

What is the common theme, or common thread, in these ten citations? I note at least four things.

1. **They all experienced suffering and isolation, a feeling of being**

forgotten or abandoned. Many were not only separated from family and loved ones, they were also separated from their dreams or pursuits of their goals and life mission. In nature, vegetation is more luscious, thick, and green in the valley than on the mountaintop. Seeds germinate when abandoned and buried in the darkness of the soil. It is in seclusion and isolation in the valley that the life inherent in the seeds comes forth. Somehow, this parallels human life. We learn real-life experiences, grow and thrive down in the valley than when life is rosy on the mountaintop. Jesus says, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain*” (Jn. 12:24). Paradoxically, death results in life.

2. **They all have happy endings.** We love stories with happy endings, no matter how unbearable the struggles in-between. Even the story of John the Baptist who did not leave jail alive because he was beheaded could be seen as a happy ending because we read, “*And as John was finishing his course, he said, ‘Who do you think that I am? I am not He,’*” (Acts 13:25a; emphasis mine). This implied that though his life was cut short John finished his mission, nonetheless. The manner of his exiting the world was violent—like Jesus’ crucifixion—but that he died faithful to his calling was what mattered (Rev. 14:13). Jesus’ life was cut short, as it were, yet He also fulfilled His life mission before He died. On the cross, Jesus did not say, “I am finished” but “It is finished; mission accomplished.” He was not finished; His assignment was. So, for John the Baptist and for Jesus, their story was “a happy ending.”
3. **Their suffering and imprisonment were transformative in the end.** They were not the same person after their release. Everyone in the ten examples above went through a process of refinement, purification, and maturation through their suffering and what they suffered. Their experience of slavery or imprisonment made freedom sweeter, and something never again to be taken for granted.

For people of faith, every suffering has a redemptive purpose, because in God's economy, pain is never wasted. Ask Joseph. Ask Job. Ask David. Ask any Old Testament saint who experienced pain and suffering. People who acknowledge God's sovereignty tend to believe that hard situations and difficult persons are sent, or allowed to come, into their lives to help tame the excesses of the flesh (or the "animal" in them), teach them something about themselves, and, thus, in the process, transform their lives. Rabbi S. Gulack, who helped to proofread this bulletin, was kind enough to point out to me that the most frequently repeated commandment in the Torah (36 times) is to remember that you were slaves in Egypt, so you should be kind to the stranger. In other words, having been treated as strangers and enslaved should inform, reform or transform their perception and treatment of foreigners and slaves, give them the ability to identify with, walk in the shoes of those who suffer, because they are foreigners or slaves.

- 4. It took a divine intervention for them to come through unscathed and better off.** The odds were against them, but God had a way of making a way where there's none. I hope you will not lose sight of this divine deliverance. Some of you need to keep this front and center so you don't lose hope. No human being is omniscient enough to be pessimistic, because when and where you least expect, the "God-factor" may come in. For example, a new procedure may be developed, a new administration, new government or new set of policies might be favorable, a miracle cure or vaccine may be developed, transfers may bring in other persons with a fresh untainted eyes, or anything may happen, when God is in the picture.

The Prisoners and the Managers Who Keep them in Check

Two pastors, who have been friends from seminary, like to tease each other on their post-seminary professions and callings. One has served as chaplain in three different prisons for many years. When his friend introduces him, he says, “Meet my friend, Frank, for the past twenty years he’s been in three State prisons; they just keep moving him from one jail to another.” Now, I leave you to imagine the look on the face of the person to whom Frank’s friend is introducing Frank. Some people withdraw their outreached hand from having a handshake with Frank and try to disappear from the scene. His friend then clarifies. “Oh! I didn’t tell you; Frank is a prison chaplain. He has served in 3 jails as chaplain. He’s not a criminal.” The third party then feels relaxed and he’s able to complete the pleasantries.

Not unlike Frank’s story, for almost a decade I’ve spent a greater part of that season of my life in this Correctional Facility. For 40 hours every week, I breathe the same air, polluted by smoke from cigarette smokers in the walkway (I wish the facemasks we wear for Covid-19 protection could filter out the smoke, but they don’t.) I bring my home cooked meals and eat my lunch and dinner in jail. Most days I close at 8:00 pm, to be followed by a 45-minute commute home. I wouldn’t like to eat that late at home before bed, hence, dinner in jail. Happily, I go home every night. Tired and worn out, I try to get some sleep only to continue the same routine the next day.

One year as a widower and having no family to share the day with, I marked my birthday here “in jail,” as it were. I spent my 12-hour day schedule in prison with inmates on my special day. I found a way of making myself feel happy and wonderful all that day, on my birthday spent “in jail.” I had asked myself early in the morning, “If Jesus had a choice between spending His birthday—or any special day—with the high and mighty or the down and out of society, which group would Jesus choose to spend the day with?” Without any doubt, Jesus would choose to be with the down and out, the least and last of society. Jesus would shun the company of the religious and political officials of His day to spend His time with the outcast, lepers, dis-

eased, and the publicly despised tax collectors. Anytime it crossed my mind during that day that this was my birthday I was spending “in jail,” I would counter any depressing feeling by reminding myself that I was where Jesus would have been if it was His birthday. Thankfully, I’m remarried. My wife will not let that happen anymore. I sometimes wonder if this isn’t part of what Booker T. Washington had in mind when he said, “You can’t hold a man down without staying down with him.”

On my days off work, Thursdays, and Fridays, I used to sub in a local school in the district. It gave me a positive visibility in the community. Before subbing I was just a black man driving a nice car in a white neighborhood. When I walked the streets for exercise, I was never sure what people were thinking or how they perceived me when they stared at me walking on their walkway. With subbing, however, I became a face with a name and a noble profession. It was not uncommon to find some young boys and girls riding their bikes close enough to say, “Hi Mr. O,” when I did my exercise walk. They also introduced me to their parents as “my teacher.” From then on, I felt less threatening and less threatened as well. Unlike my previous years in the classroom, Mr. O. was now a different person, paranoid as far as safety and security were concerned. If I found a broken piece of wood or metal, empty cans of soda or glass bottles of soda, or any sharp object in the classroom or hallway, my security consciousness went into another mode. I found myself trying to take away paper clips from students, hiding away their teacher’s pairs of scissors in her desk drawers, and removing any metallic spoon or fork from their sight. I had to remind myself that these were kids in a classroom, not a jailhouse. In prison, such items are considered as class A tools. An inmate might use them (paper clips, scissors, or metallic cutlery) as a weapon or forge them into one. A couple of times, saying “the inmate” or “an inmate” when referring to a student very nearly easily slipped out of my tongue when I wanted to talk about “a student” to their teachers.

During my rounds in one of the dorms, an inmate who had read my January Bulletin, was happy to see me and glowing with excitement. He dropped what he was doing, engaged me in a conversation and followed me to the

CO's desk. He told me he enjoyed the story of the Dressed up Lie and Naked Truth and had been sharing it with other inmates in the dorm. As I was by the CO to sign his book, the inmate said he had given it to another inmate to read and, after reading it, the inmate had commented that I was crazy. I heard it as a compliment, and I believed he meant it so, too. Tongue in cheek, I replied, "You have to be crazy to do this job." "Tell me about it!" the CO interjected and concurred.

The Long Train Ride Analogy

So, back to my question: To what shall I liken a prison sentence? In modern language, to what do I liken a prison sentence? I liken it to a long ride on an interstate local train making stops along the trip. Please stay with me. I had my first and longest train ride in 1973. I traveled from Lagos to Kano in Nigeria, a journey thousands of kilometers with stops in towns and cities along the railway track. It took more than 24 hours, probably took two or three days—I can't really remember how long.³⁵ The scenery kept changing along the route, from rain forest to savannah, lowland, flatlands, rocks, and mountains and steeply hills.

It's not only the outward scene that was changing; things were changing in the train as well. The sanitary condition was acceptable at the beginning, but it soon became deplorable and littered. There was only one bathroom available near enough to do number 1 and number 2 on the journey. Many on the train had poor hygiene practices, to put it mildly. The train was well stocked when it left Lagos, but supplies had dwindled to nothing as the journey progressed. The faces in the cars kept changing as some disembarked and other passengers came on board. The noise level was unpredictable. Children were happy and playing one minute and crying from discomfort in the next. I was stuck in the same cabin, same seat, eating the same food I brought with me from home or bought from hawkers along the route. Some passengers snored

35. Google search in 2021 reveals that Lagos-Kano by railway is a 33-hour journey. It might start on Monday (5:00 pm) and last till Wednesday (3:07 am), stopping in major cities and states like Oyo, Osun, Kwara, Niger, and Kaduna.

so loudly I could hardly sleep. My joy was that no matter how much inconvenience this was, this nightmare had an ending and I eagerly looked forward to the end of the journey. When others disembarked, I could not help but be secretly jealous that I still had many hours to go in the train.

I could not let my guard down, because I could not be certain who the person, or what were the motives of the person in the same car with me. Neither could I be sure who the person passing from one car to another in the dead of the night was or the motives behind the action. They could violate, hurt, or rob me of my little possessions. Another anxiety was what the end of my journey would be like. I was going to meet an older cousin I didn't know, never met, and who also just knew me by name. I had his photograph, taken together with his wife, with me; he had none of mine. Would there be anyone in the station waiting to ferry me to his home for the last leg of my trip? Would he keep the promise to meet me with warm clothing and snack as I finally left the station? The train was delayed; so, it arrived many hours past the schedule. My cousin had come earlier to the train station and was told to return some hours later.³⁶ As I disembarked, I held the photograph of him and his wife in my hand. I heard someone yelling, "Sunday! Sunday! Sunday!" as he walked briskly up and down along the platform. "Sunday;" that's the name I'm known by in the family. I accosted him and tried to study his face with the photograph in the poorly lit station. I was about to ask, "Are you..." when he saw the photograph I was holding. He smiled and said, "So they gave you that. Follow me. I came earlier, but the train was delayed. They had radioed me from our office in Lagos that you were arriving on this train." I breathed, and followed.

Finally, after all the complaints and suffering, I got back to my destination. I was home at last. It was home away from home. I had embarked on the journey to seek employment in Kano City. The journey started in the am (sunrise, morning, or younger years for some of you) and ended in the pm

36. That was the way things worked back then. He couldn't have checked their website for time of arrival. This was Nigeria in 1973. There were no mobile phones, no websites to check/confirm, and no Internet search then. Only the wealthy and senior government officials had phones in their government living quarters.

(evening, or waning, sunset years of life). For some of you, technology has changed a million times while you were away in the slammer. By the time you arrive home, your boy has become a man, and your girl a married woman or nursing mother. The journey that started in one city may end for you in another city with a different character, lifestyle, ambience, and atmosphere but what can you do? Your choices have become very limited. Even if you reentered the same city, it wouldn't be the city you had left or once knew; everything's changed. I was stuck for two or three days in the train and it looked like eternity before it was over. Yet, you've been stuck in jail for a lot longer, cooped up and crammed up in the same sized cube from one prison to another or one dorm to another.

The Positive Side of the Parable/Analogy

Did I plead with you to stay with me? Please bear with me a little longer. Back to my question again: To what shall I liken a prison sentence? I can say it is like a long ride on a local interstate train making stops along the trip. What do I mean? I'm glad you asked. On the positive side, what the train tracks are to the train, the prison is to some inmates. The tracks provide,

- **Boundary.** That's a missing element in many inmates. Boundaries are necessary in every aspect of life. The train runs smoothly, because it stays within its boundaries, within the tracks. Traveling outside of the boundaries provided by the tracks is problematic; we call that derailment. A young man moving ahead in his studies, college-bound and with a promising career in the pipeline is now sitting in jail. What do you call that? Derailment. This same young man can get back on track and continue his journey. It is called, a second chance, something with which Americans are magnanimous.
- **Restrictions and limits.** Nobody likes this. Yet, with millions of cars and drivers on the road, how can you travel and ensure safety without some restrictions and limits like road signs, speed limits,

stop signs, traffic lights: red lights, amber and green lights, police check points, rest areas, road bumps, road diversion signs, railway crossing signals, etc. These put restrictions and limits on us but without them, can you imagine how chaotic journeying would be like? Can you imagine a total blackout when all the traffic lights do not work and with no police officers at intersections to control traffic in New York City, Chicago, or California? If life is not at standstill in those cities, then automobile accidents are sure to prevail. So, those restrictions are not working against us; they are working for us and helping to establish our rights. If you would embrace the restrictions and limits that the jail puts on you with a new attitude, you might find them entirely liberating.

When any inmate has complaints about a strict CO, I like the way Chaplain Imam Gaber handles it. He asks the inmate to imagine a scenario where all the COs walk out of the jail for just 30 minutes while the inmates are left to themselves in the dorms, gyms, and yards. "What do you think will happen or can happen in those 30 minutes?" Every inmate he speaks with fears thinking or even imagining such a scenario. They always admit that they feel safer knowing that the COs and sergeants are around. With gang members in the dorms, with incessant vicious rivalries between the gangs, with inmates who 24/7 are in constant mode of rage and resentment, with inmates who have manic sexual tendencies, what do you suppose will happen with no officer around to put them in check? Can you imagine the kind of chaos likely to ensue? I have listened to inmates who said they feel safer when the CO is vigilant, strict, firm, and fair. I guess it's their way of saying, "Thank you, Mr. CO, for doing your job."

- **Prevents dissipation of energy.** Can you imagine a train just burning gas and moving without direction? Well, some of you were. You had your leg to the pedal in full throttle but going nowhere in particular. You were just traveling full speed until a crash happened.

Hopefully, the prison provides you with a pause and you can reset or reboot in a new direction after incarceration.

- **Provides structure or a set of order of events and actions.** This is like having a boundary. We all need some established structure, healthy routine and habits built into our lives. The opposite of structure is disorganization. They say, “The devil finds work for idle hands.” You and I know that dysfunction, idleness, and lack of structure are just the means that the Devil exploited to bring many into the prison. Now, it’s time to make some adult, self-responsible decisions.
- **Constant change of scenery.** As I looked out on my long train ride, I observed changing scenery from one locality or community to another. I observed people dressing differently, farming differently, and going about different kinds of businesses. If you pay attention and have your heart tuned in the right direction, you will discover that the universe (*uni*—one; *verse*—song) is well organized and well choreographed to sing its one song in harmony. Young or old, rich or poor, educated or not educated, all our voices blend in to sing the one song of the universe. However, we sometimes sing in disunity and distort the harmony, because some are singing out of tune. The good news is that the pendulum of life swings back and forth to achieve equilibrium.

Everything in life, every experience, every person you come in contact with is supposed to be your teacher and leave something with you to make you wiser, kinder, and more into the human person you were meant to be. Every counselor, every CO, every jail, every inmate in your dorm, every bunk you’ve had... all these were sent as your tutors and prearranged to teach you something in life. I hope you aren’t missing those classes and lessons by focusing only on the problem and forgetting that behind those problems or inherent in those problems are your blessings.

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but some people believe that

automatic promotions happen only in the New York City school system, not in real life. In real life, promotion and advancement come by merits—you earn them. They believe that you will not be promoted if you fail a test in life, but you will be given the chance to retake and re-sit the same test or exam again and again and again until you finally pass it. For that reason, a person may keep on adding calendar years to his age but remain in the same class—on the same spot he/she was emotionally, financially, relationally, or mentally five, ten, or fifteen years previously. He can continue to take the same class, the same lesson, year after year after year. You move on to the next stage of your life only when you've learned the prerequisite lessons and passed the test. So, it's up to you. Besides, not every life exam has a do-over provision.

The Negative Side of the Parable/Analogy

On the negative side, however, the long train ride provides,

- **Monotony and humdrum.** I think of my long train ride from Lagos to Kano. I was stuck but I had a choice how to spend or expend my stuck condition. For, example, I could sleep or read or just watch the hours go by with meaningless thoughts. You have the same choice, limited choice, but little is better than nothing. How are you engaged in making sense of your stuck-ness? Remember, long or short, there's going to be an end, someday, to the journey. Would you be the same, worse or a better person at the end of your journey?
- **Restlessness.** I'm still thinking of my train ride. God knows how often and how many times I checked my watch; it was as if the hour hand refused to budge. Yet, I couldn't walk far from my luggage; not knowing what might happen if I dozed off or lost sight of it. Nightfall, but I couldn't sleep. In the past several years of my working in this jail, have I seen restlessness in people's actions and movements? You bet! Many have learned to make the best of

the worst situations in which they find themselves. Some inmates complete their educational goals; others have learned three or more trades and vocational certifications they can make use of after their release from jail. Life is about adapting, morphing, transforming, and re-inventing oneself. Dinosaurs are extinct today, because they failed to adapt to changing environment. The solution to restlessness is to become engaged in something positive, even if you cannot see its value or usefulness at the present time.

- **Strange faces.** I had no idea who was in the car with me and none of us made any effort to strike a conversation or get acquainted. All we wanted was the journey to be over. What do you deal with here? They are new COs, new sergeants, new counselors, new inmates, changing faces, no permanent friendship or camaraderie—just survival instincts and tactics. Never forget that one of those strange faces may hold the key to your next step. He/she may be on the lowest rung of the totem pole, but a word of wisdom or touch of his/her hand may achieve more than any relationship has done in your life.
- **Different drop off stations.** As a passenger reached the end of his/her journey, my buttocks and my spine were even more painful and itching to get off as well. In a sadder form, you've experienced the same. You watch other inmates being released and you wonder and ask yourself: When is it going to be my turn and my time to go, to eventually get off this ride and go home? I wanted to say, "patience" but it sounded like a hollow religious platitude to me as well. So, I'll put it the American way, "Hang in there. Winter may drag on and last so long, like forever, but hang in there. Spring does come faithfully every year. Spring will come this year, too." The sun will rise again; believe it or not. My mailing list has shrunk considerably, compared to what it was at the beginning of the pandemic. This is good news. It means many are being released from jail and going back to society, family, and friends.

- **Same menu, same entertainment.** Talk of boredom! Back to my train journey in 1973. Whenever the doors of the train were opened in some stations, there was a mass of people rushing in, some commuting to another towns, others selling their wares and foodstuff to passengers on the train. One stepped on your toes here, and another was shoving you to the side of the train. Side to side, chest to chest, you struggled to breathe. You could not afford to lose your seat or your balance. Sooner than later, when the siren sounded, those not commuting exited. We then had some breathing spaces. How you pass or spend your lonely humdrum bored existence in this place is a testament to how you value your life. Life handed you a lemon. You can make lemonade out of it and market it. You can whine and grumble and hold on to that lemon until it is rotten, and you are left with stench and a rot. I hope that does not speak about any of you here. You won't get out before your time, but you can invest in yourself while you are still cooped up in your cell. That's a choice no one can take from you and a decision no one can make for you.
- **Anxiety.** What if my cousin did not show up? How was I to cope in a strange land? You know where I am going with this: Reentry. What's (and who's) awaiting you when you reenter society? Hopefully, there will be housing, family, friends, mentors, and employment. What don't you need but is surely out there waiting for you? There's booze, dope, gangs, porn, hate, crime, and quick-money-making-schemes. Need I say more? God had warned Cain, *"But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it,"* (Gen. 4:7b; NIV). I just gave you the same warning. A founding father of America, inventor and philosopher, Benjamin Franklin, was credited with the saying: "If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail!" Therefore, make plans. Have plan A, plan B and plan C. PRAY, TRUST, CONNECT, THINK, BE DETERMINED.

"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set

before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live,” (Deut. 30:19).

I charge you as Moses did to the Israelites: CHOOSE LIFE—that you and your descendants may live.

Conclusion: Making Sense of Nonsense

What’s the lesson? You tell me. It’s a parable. It’s supposed to mean different things to different people. It’s meant to be nothing more than a confusing meaningless riddle to shallow thinkers and food-for-thought, and a breath of fresh air to deep thinkers. All I want to leave with you is the same appeal I make to my friends who complain about being stuck and locked down and bored during the global pandemic. I urge them to see the gift in this pandemic—to take up a new challenge, start a new project or do something differently.

One pastor and church pioneer I know very well has founded five churches in different locations. He is also a 35-year veteran schoolteacher in the New York City school system (He hasn’t retired, because he still has a daughter in college). Pre-Covid-19, he sometimes preached in four places on Sundays, running from one church to another. He told me God has given him this year to rest. He teaches his classes on Zoom from the comfort of his bedroom. He preaches on Zoom twice on Sundays, at 8:00 am and 11:00 am, also from the comfort of his backyard as background. The church offering hasn’t dwindled because of the faithfulness of the members. Though restricted, they continue to do outreach, feeding the hungry and clothing the destitute. I know many others who will one day look back and be grateful for the prolonged downtime and lockdown that had pushed them to explore other means of livelihood. So, what do I say to you? You have the choice to turn this period that you are cooped up in your cell into a period of self-improvement, self-investing and pursuit of a lifelong worthy goal.

One way or another, however long or indeterminate, your train ride—your prison sentence—will end in one station. What you do presently will determine if, looking back, that’s going to be a happy ending or not—hope-

fully, a sigh of relief, and a happy ending to a horrible, nightmarish dream.

Reflection Questions

1. Of the ten cases of those biblical characters who once experienced imprisonment or harsh bondage of slavery in the introductory part of the bulletin, whose story parallels yours? Which one resonates more with you right now, and why?
2. The chaplain noted four common themes in the ten case-stories, which of them gives you a ray of hope in your imprisonment? How does it encourage you to hope and believe that your situation can be redemptive and remedial, and not be a totally lost cause?
3. Of the bullets in the positive side of the analogy/parable of the long train ride, which sounds more like your present reality? How can you make it work in the end to your advantage?
4. Of the bullets on the negative side of the analogy/parable of the long train ride, which sounds more like your present reality? How can you not make it to work against you but in your favor?
5. The long train ride will one day come to the last station for you to disembark. What is your strategy for reentry into society? (Remember Franklin: "If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail!").
6. How does the parable of the long train ride speak to you or your situation? If it does not make sense to you, explain the weak points or disconnections to your reality?
7. In this place, what does boredom look like for you? What is your coping strategy, so it does not bog you down?
8. Envisage the best-case realistic scenario to your situation. Begin to think, plan, relate and work towards making that best-case scenario you've envisioned become your possibility and reality.
9. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17. Reflect on the passage and, through the text of the passage, write a letter to God (or to your pastor) about your journey thus far based on what you've experienced or are experiencing.

Ministering to Inmates During a Yearlong Pandemic Lockdown

10. Read Proverbs chapter 1 and Ecclesiastes chapter 12. Write a letter, titled: “Been There Done That, Young Man, Learn from Me” to a teenager on the street who is running with the wrong crowd. (Do you have anyone in mind you could share or mail your letter to?)

PS. If you no longer wish to receive any mail from me, please write me to take you off my mailing list.

Sample Takeaways from Protestant Community/Family Day Festivals

Roadblocks on the Way to Hell³⁷ (Matthew 5:27-30; 18:6-9; also, Mark 9:42-48)

Matthew 18:8, 9 8“If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into everlasting fire. 9And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire.”

Yeah, believe it or not, Jesus, who alone could tell with absolute certainty what heaven and hell looked like, after weighing the options, Jesus said you were better off getting to heaven with a missing hand, foot or eye than ending

37. The “family day” is an annual event, for all recognized religions in prison, when the inmates can invite their family members to visit and participate in their worship experience. Inmates usually augment the State menu with extra grocery items, which they purchase from their own account, such as, chicken thighs or breast, seasonings, soft drinks, coffee/tea pots, and various snacks, depending on the purse of the religious organization. It is usually a treat for the inmates and a good way to entertain their family/guests. These two titles were made into pamphlet/booklet forms and distributed during Protestant Family Day Events. They have been expanded here. “Roadblocks to Hell” was distributed on Saturday, May 10, 2014 and “Dinner Invitation from the Risen Lord” was distributed on Saturday, May 30, 2015. In its expanded form, “Dinner Invitation from the Risen Lord” was distributed to inmates on Protestant call out in November 2020, during the Covid-19 lockdown when services and meetings were prohibited.

up in hell with limbs and eyes and all bodily parts complete. In another place, Jesus posed the question of divine economics, of gains and losses, when He asked, “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” “Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:36; Matt. 16:26b; KJV).

I hear this phrase or expression out of anger, and sometimes used frivolously, “Go to hell!” or “Get lost!” The yeller is pissed off and expressing anger. Yet, it is not easy to go to hell, or be lost, or to no longer be under God’s radar. At least, God did not make it easy. God deliberately places some roadblocks on the way to hell. Now, it is possible to scale all the roadblocks by anyone determined to go to hell at any cost.

You’ve probably heard the question, or asked the question yourself, “How can a loving God, who is our heavenly Father, send any of His creatures to hell—if there’s a hell?” You are absolutely right. A loving God does not send anyone to hell. People, of their own volition, choose to befriend Satan and spend eternity in hell with the devil. God simply allows them to have their way. According to Jesus, hell was “the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels,” (Matt. 25:41) not intended or prepared for human beings. Someone cleverly said that hell is what you get when God finally let you have your way, unrestrained.

Really, it will be a disservice and disrespectful of God or anyone in authority to force himself on other persons. Especially, for God to ask (or force) anyone to live and spend eternity with Him when that individual never considered himself a friend of God. Consider someone who’s never coveted God’s presence or anything religious in his/her pursuits on earth, never given much thought to angels or heaven in the hustle and bustle of life down here, never taken delight in spiritual songs and hymns and prayers and praises and halleluiahs while he goes about his business here on earth; nevertheless, these are the kind of things many expect to dominate heaven. Then for God to put that individual through what he has always regarded as “nonsense” for eternity, then that’s hell! That’s absolute cruelty and total insensitivity!

My most painful conversations on religion or afterlife had been with

people who were irreligious or nonreligious but had reconciled themselves to and accepted a bleak and doomed eternal destiny as a forgone conclusion. They said if there's a hell then they deserved to go to hell for all they'd done. They further told me that they had made their peace with that reality and pled with me not to waste my breath on them talking about God's forgiveness or salvation which they'd concluded they did not deserve.

Heaven or Hell: What's Beyond the Grave in the Afterlife?

Heaven and hell! Are they real places? We hear of heaven and hell in songs, both secular and religious. We wonder what the truth is about these otherworldly places. In the age of information, we ponder if we are being well informed or misinformed, deliberately or inadvertently. Happily, or to complicate matters, there's scanty information in the Bible on heaven and hell. One reason for this, I believe, is because we terrestrial beings do not have the earthly or human language to describe these celestial domains. However, enough is given in the Bible for us to desire heaven and shun hell. Heaven and hell are part of the unfathomable mysteries of Divinity that are unsearchable to finite minds (Psa. 145:3; Rom. 11:33). Conservative evangelical and progressive theologians, all delving into the original languages of the words, still have their differences on what heaven and hell are.

Because all religions of the world that believe in immortality of the human souls and the next world or afterlife talk about heaven in one form or another to their adherents, I have taken my simple definition of heaven, from Jesus' valedictory speech, as the "Father's house." On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus comforted His confused and perplexed disciples about His impending death. He assured them His death was as planned from eternity, and was purposeful. He was going away to prepare a place for them, and would come back again for them. In essence, He was saying, "Good night, see you tomorrow"; not "Good-bye, take care of yourself." Jesus said in John 14:1-3,

"Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in

Me. In MY FATHER'S HOUSE are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." (Emphasis mine).

Jesus said, "*In My Father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you. I will come again and receive you to Myself.*" That's hope! That's heaven for me: where Jesus is, the Father's house. That also defines and delimits hell for me. Hell is where Jesus is not; it is not the Father's house but Satan's domain and ultimate destiny. Some argue about how fair it is for a just God to punish a person to an eternity of suffering in hell for sins and lawless deeds committed in less than a century of existence. A person lived in sin and separation from God and godliness for 70, 80 or 90 years, and for that he will be punished for thousands and millions and millennia of years in hell? Where's justice in that? How does that punishment fit the crime? How fair is that from a righteous Deity? Well, I'm glad we don't have to find out in the hard and irreparable way. The Bible teaches that hell was not intended for human beings. The good news is that anyone can choose the salvation God offers and spend eternity in the Father's house with Jesus, and never have to bother whether hell is real or not, or what hell is like.

When I gave my life to Christ in 1972, it was not out of fear of going to hell in the afterlife. I was 20. I wanted to live. I wasn't thinking of death and dying. However, I do not deny that the fear of hell and the desire to escape hell could be lurking at the back of my mind. My immediate need for Jesus then was to escape the lifestyle I was powerless to change but conscious enough to know that it was leading me down a wrong path and dead-end alley. In 1972, I needed to escape an impending bottomless pit I was getting myself into, and might have gotten into, if the grace of God had not "arrested" me in my tracks and redirected my footsteps thenceforward. You and I know some people today who put up a smiling face, but their life is a vicious cycle, a living hell, of torments and freefall in a bottomless pit. Jesus said, "*The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.*" For

that reason—the possibility of having life and having life more abundantly here on earth that Jesus promised, I will give my life to Christ again and again, even if there's no hell in the hereafter.

Everybody is Going to Heaven; the Question is, “Which Heaven”?

For political correctness, I readily agree or assert that everybody is going to heaven. I then clarify by saying, however, not everybody is going to Jesus' "Father's House." That place, with many mansions that Jesus has gone ahead to make ready, is reserved for those who come to God through Him. Jesus' "Father's house" is for those only who piggyback on Jesus. Heaven or "the heaven of heavens" is too spacious, expansive, and extensive to exclude anyone, but Jesus' "Father's House" is exclusive to those who rest their eternal souls on Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection for their salvation. It makes sense, doesn't it?

When conversations get to who goes to heaven and who is condemned to hell in this culture that's quick to label Christians as intolerant and exclusive, I usually tailor my response in a two-fold manner. First, my disclaimer: I say God has not given me the assignment of deciding who goes to hell and who goes to heaven, so I could never be categorical or specific about anyone's eternal destiny. Second, and this is where I shock many, I say: Everybody is going to heaven in one sense or another. I then explain thus: The Bible talks of heavens in the plural (Gen. 1:1, 9, 14; Judg. 5:20), and "heaven of heavens" (Neh. 9:6; 2 Chron. 6:2, 18; Psa. 148:4). Prophet Jeremiah speaks of "these heavens," (Jer. 10:11; KJV/NKJV), and the apostle Paul speaks of being "caught up to the third heaven" in 2 Corinthians 12:2. If there's a third heaven, then there has to be the first and second heavens, and probably more than three. Some say there are seven heavens. I care not to know how many heavens there are. In fact, I refuse to use the word "heaven" as the place my soul goes after death. I prefer saying that I am piggybacking on Jesus to the place He calls, "My Father's house." I choose to stake the eternal destiny of my soul on that promise of Jesus,

In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also (John 14:2, 3).

Riding on Jesus' ticket, when I finally get to Jesus' "Father's house," I want it to be my happy surprise to finally make the discovery that Jesus' "Father's house" is actually the first, second, or third heaven, or the "heaven of heavens," or whichever. As long as Jesus and His Father are there, that's enough for me and it is awesome.

If, in a public debate, anyone attempts to goad me towards religious intolerance, bigotry, and exclusivity, especially about Jesus' exclusive claims, such as in John 14:6, where Jesus says, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me,*" I usually put on my educator's cap and answer the question with my own set of questions. I may ask, "Did Jesus claim in that verse that He was the only way to heaven, or that He was the only way by which anyone could come to the Father, that is, to His Father?" Most say, "Jesus claims to be the only way to come to the Father." In that case, heaven is not the issue. Jesus was speaking about His Father's House. In like manner, any cab driver can take you to my house address in Albany, but only my generosity and my set of keys will bring you into my house. As with other houses on the avenue, my house is restricted, and private. The door is open only to those I choose to let into my house; otherwise, they are trespassers. Anyone may walk or jog along the avenue, stepping on my driveway without my permission, is a cause for alarm. If anyone wants to go to heaven, he or she is free to go there by whatever way or means, but if any person intends to go to Jesus' Father's house, then he or she must come through Jesus. Jesus says He is the Way and the Door (Jn. 10:9). It's that simple.

I may follow up with other questions, such as, "If you met a true Christian who had read those words in John 14:6 in his religion's sacred Book from the lips of his revered religious leader, where He said, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me,*" would you expect him to believe those words as his absolute truth, or would you expect him

to edit, twist, and reinterpret the words of his venerated religious founder in his religion's sacred book in such a way as not to offend other people who believe differently and don't belong to his religious persuasion? Would you respect him as a true Christian if he capitulated to other people's opinions in disregard for his sacred book?" Most admit they would expect a Christian to stick with his sacred book and religious leader's pronouncements or choose a different religion that suits his conviction. To that, I simply say, "We are on the same page."

Up Yonder Behind The Clouds

This much we know: anytime the curtains of heaven are opened and we get a peep of what's going on we hear singing and joyful shouts and praises to God. If we are into such things on earth, death and dying might just be transition into another form to continue our worship of God. For example, Revelation 4:8-11; 19:1-6, we have such glimpse of heaven, as we read:

"The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!" Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: "You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created." (Rev. 4:8-11).

After these things I heard a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, "Alleluia! Salvation and glory and honor and power belong to the Lord our God! For true and righteous are His judgments, because He has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication; and He has avenged on her the blood of His servants shed by her." Again they said, "Alleluia! Her smoke rises up forever and ever!" And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sat on the

throne, saying, "Amen! Alleluia!" Then a voice came from the throne, saying, "Praise our God, all you His servants and those who fear Him, both small and great!" And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! (Rev. 19:1-6).

First, consider it from God's side: It will be very cruel of God to force a person who cares less about the Holy Roller outbursts of "Praise God! Glory! Hallelujah! Amen!" into a heavenly atmosphere where for all of eternity all he hears is nothing else but "Praise God! Glory! Hallelujah! Amen!" from the angels and the redeemed of the Lord. Isn't that like forcing broccoli down the throat of a child who has a natural distaste for the vegetable and knowing he will throw it up if it touches his tongue, simply because you consider broccoli is good for the child? In the big picture, life on earth is like rehearsal time, like preparation for the kind of way and manner we intend to spend eternity.

Second, consider it from the individual's side: You might regard it as "welcome to eternal bliss in heaven," but to him it is "welcome to eternal torture and misery." To bring a person whose earthly life is defined by boozing, violence, hatred, loveless sexual gratification, drugging and inhaling smokes from dried tobacco leaves, weeds, grasses and all in-betweens to a place where none of these are practiced will be like bringing him to a place of depravation and torture. Such a heaven to him is nothing but a living hell, having to spend all of eternity with things and events he's never been interested in and beings with whom he's never kept company. That's why a loving and respectful God will not insist on anyone spending eternity with Him when it is out of that individual's character on earth.

We also know that anytime the curtains of hell are opened we hear of wailing and gnashing of teeth. "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth," (Matt. 13:41, 42). The story of the poor man, Lazarus and the rich, selfish neighbor, Luke 16:22-24, 27-31, is illustrative and graphic:

So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's

bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. “Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’ . . . “Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.’”

On a lighter mood, racism in the church is puzzling to me because, in the ideal sense, the church is supposed to mirror what heaven looks like. Revelation 7:9, 10 says, “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” That means every tribe, every tongue, every shade, and color of humanity, from all nations of the world will gather around the throne of God. Now, we all know that that’s too much for a racist to chew. I wonder if a racist were offered a place in heaven if he would really accept the offer knowing fully well that he would be spending eternity with those he had despised on earth. Without a change of heart on his part, that would certainly be eternal torture. In my mind, I can see a dyed-in-the-wool bigot and racist just walking out of heaven, and muttering to himself, “If heaven means sitting together with this bunch of people for all eternity, I rather just go to hell.” That is, until he knows what a literal hell is like.

What is hell? What does it mean to be lost? I will not go into any theological definition (Matthew 25:41, 46; 8:12; 10:15). Simply, hell is the place or station in life or in death where God is not. If you can conceive a place where God is not for a day, a week, a month, a year, a decade, a century, a millennium, or eternity, then that’s hell. In Romans 1 and 2 we read of a people the Bible says,

“God is not in their thoughts,” (Romans 1:28). They did whatever pleased them.

Jesus’ Warnings in Context

Set in its context, the text, Matthew 5:27-30, contains Jesus’ stern warning about the damning effects of sexual sin or adultery. Jesus said:

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell,” (Matt. 5:27-30).

In its context, the text Matthew 18:6-9, Jesus warns about the self-destructive consequences of tempting or leading others to sin.

“But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes! If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire,” (Matt. 18:6-9).

In both, the message is clear: No Sacrifice Is Too Great to Avoid Destruction In Hell.

God’s Outstretched Open Arms to Whosoever

God does not want anyone to go to hell. Hell was created for Satan (Matthew 25:41). God’s desire is for all His creation to accept His Lordship and live eternally with Him. From Old Testament to New Testament, Scripture

abundantly declares God's heartfelt desire for humanity:

"The Lord is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;" (Ps. 103:8-11).

"Come now, and let us reason together,' Says the Lord, 'Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool,'" (Isa. 1:18).

"Seek the Lord while He may be found, Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the Lord, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon," (Isa. 55:6, 7).

"Say to them: 'As I live,' says the Lord God, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?'" (Eze. 33:11).

"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved," (Jn. 3:17).

"For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth," (1 Tim. 2:3, 4).

"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance," (2 Pet. 3:9).

Roadblocks to Hell

I will mention some of the roadblocks God put in place to keep human beings out of hell.

1. God's love as seen in a loving and sacrificing Savior, Jesus Christ; John 3:16-18. (Also, Jeremiah 29:11). To go to hell, you must be willing to walk over and despise God's love and plan for your

life. “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope,” (Jer. 29:11). For you, religion, or the idea of God loving you and God having a purpose for your life is for women and children. (Illustration: I have seen the condition of some babies in the hospital that reminded me of the saying or song, “Only a mother could love him.” Oh yes, you need to see how the mothers accept and love these babies despite their condition of mental or physical health, without any regard to the defects. That’s the way God loves and accepts us – unconditionally.)

2. Simplicity of the gospel. John 3:36; Romans 5:8; Acts 16:31. The good news of salvation is not complicated. It is so simple a child can believe. You don’t have to achieve a certain level of education; you don’t have to learn a religious language like Hebrew or Arabic or Greek to relate to this God. You don’t have to visit Jerusalem or Mecca. For you, this is too good, too easy, and too simple to be true. (Illustration: Your credit is not good; you’ve maxed out your credit card; you cannot buy anything anymore. A wealthy person, with unlimited resources, then decides to link your deficit account to his unlimited account. Though your credit is not good by itself, linked to an inexhaustible account, you can keep on spending. In like manner, God says, “I’ll link your always deficit and negative account to my inexhaustible account.” We read that transaction in 2 Corinthians 5:21; Isaiah 53:6.)
3. Concerned family and friends. Matthew 22:1-14; John 1:35-42, esp. 40-42. There are many family members and friends that God has placed in your life who are deeply concerned about your welfare, spiritually, materially, socially, and emotionally. They are daily praying for you, rooting for you and cheering you on. There’s no one who does not have a friend or family member sincerely praying for you to experience a new life or a new relationship with God. You must despise these people, ridicule their love and concern for

you and belittle their help in order to go to hell. Many of you are already doing that. It is a choice.

4. The voice/witness of your own conscience. Romans 2:15; Ecclesiastes. 3:11. The Apostle Paul argues in his Epistle to the Romans that the material world of created things (that is, creation itself) and our conscience (the whisper within each one of us) are twin witnesses to God or a Supreme Deity. If I go to an island and I find pebbles all over the place, what does that say of the place? It could be a virgin island. What if the pebbles are arranged to form a word, say, PEACE? What does that say about the island? It's been visited. Traditional argument is that "there's intelligence behind every design." You cannot find a watch on the roadside, ticking time, and say it just happened by accident. There had to be a designer, intelligence behind it. The solar system, galaxy of stars, the human body and now DNA in their well-synchronized fashion, are pointers that there's intelligence behind them. Romans 1:19-23.
Paul also talks about conscience, Romans 2:15 and the writer of Ecclesiastes in Ecclesiastes. 3:11. There is a witness in every person's heart. One of the Church Fathers, St. Augustine of Hippo, said, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee." The physicist, Blaise Pascal, wrote in *Pensees*, published in 1670, "There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus." Many have attempted to fill that vacuum with sex, money, success, popularity, fame, work, religion, spirituality, alcohol, drugs, travels, adventure, sports, whatever fits human fancy. Only in the end to discover that the vacuum, the hole, the emptiness, is still there. For you to say, "There's no God," or that there's no life after death, or that you are not a sinner is to be untrue to the witness of your own conscience. There's something inside each one of us that testifies to us that we are accountable to a Greater Being; that some unseen but felt Pres-

ence is around us.

Helen Keller was blind and deaf from the age of two, she had lived a life of isolation, unable to speak words she could not hear, and unable to know what a word was. So, how did she know God? Deaf-blind Helen Keller had a great teacher and a 50-year-long companion and friend, Anne Sullivan Macy. She began teaching Helen when she was six years old. It took her a long time to explain what “water” was to Helen, much less explaining the concept of God. Water was the first word Helen learned. It was said that when Anne finally got through explaining the concept of God to blind and deaf Helen, Helen told her that she already knew there was a God.

In one of her letters, Helen told Bishop Brooks that she had always known about God, even before she had any words. Even before she could call God anything, she knew God was there. She didn't know what it was. God had no name for her—nothing had a name for her. She had no concept of a name. In her darkness and isolation, however, she knew she was not alone. Someone was with her. She felt God's love. When she received the gift of language and heard about God, she said she already knew. Blind and deaf, how did she know? It had to be the voice of conscience. You must be deliberate and intentional to press an override key in your genetic makeup to silence the witness of the voice of your conscience. It's hard to do, but it can be done, if you are so determined.

5. Lastly, the privilege of choice or your free will. Revelation 3:20; John 6:37; Matthew 11:28-30; Deuteronomy 30:19. No one can force you, charm you or wish you, to go to hell. You make that decision; you make the choice. You can make the decision by not deciding for the truth. By not accepting Christ and His claims you already make your choice against Him. The door to your heart opens only on the inside. But you can make excuses; you may procrastinate or postpone your day of decision. You say, “I don't

understand.” Do you understand how your cell phone, TV, or computer works and yet you use them? Every day, you use a ton of gadgets you have no clue how they are put together or why they work the way they do, but you believe in them enough for you to press the on/start button and make use of the invention. Faith has its own on/start button: It is called decision. You say, “People will make fun of me.” That’s what people do; they talk about doers, because they never do anything; they make fun of others who dare to change or decide, because they never decide. Besides, someday, it’s going to be you and you alone – no friends around – with your fate, your decisions, or indecisions.

So, to go to hell,

- a) You must be willing to despise God’s love or any idea that God loves and cares for you, or any suggestion that Christ died in your place and He’s willing to be your Savior.
- b) You must choose unbelief instead of believing in Christ or the good news of salvation.
- c) You must snub, ignore, and disregard your family members and friends who care for you and are praying for you.
- d) You must be untrue to your conscience, deaden the inner voice, silence any whisper that there is Someone or Something bigger and greater than yourself; or there’s a day of reckoning and a way to salvation by grace; and
- e) You have to make up your mind that hell is indeed for you by refusing to open the door of your heart and life to Jesus, who is standing at the door, knocking and asking to come in and be your Lord and Savior.

If you can do all these five things with a bold face, you’ve crossed all the major barriers God put in your way to prevent you from going to hell. Intelligently, or foolishly, you’ve made your choice: HELL is it!

The Dinner Invitation from The Risen Lord and King (Revelation 3:20)

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me,” (Rev. 3:20).

Food! What’s your favorite food? What’s it like for you to be invited to a sumptuous dinner one-on-one with the boss in his or her house? Just you and the boss, eyeball to eyeball, sharing same space, breathing in same air, and capping it off with a selfie with the boss. Wow! In most cultures of the world, eating together is a sign of fellowship, family, and friendship. Food is a symbol of love in many cultures as well. Mothers cook meals as an expression of their love and care for the family. There’s a saying in my (Yoruba) language that’s supposed to be advice to how a newly wedded bride may please, or win the heart of, her husband. It says that “The fastest and greatest inroad into a man’s (or husband’s) heart is food.” Good food is winsome and can inspire the new husband to bend backwards and return the favor by doing things that are pleasing to his bride as well. Leaders of political and not-for-profit organizations have found out that not only do volunteers turn out in large numbers but that the morale is high as well when snacks or free meals are part of the agenda. Food!

To be invited to a great banquet is a great honor, and to be invited to dine with the president, king/queen or monarch is a rare of favor that only a few are privileged to have. In Revelation 3:20 (also Matthew 22:1-14), Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, throws out an open invitation to whosoever, to come and dine with Him. From this verse, my simple definition of who a Christian is will be this: Someone who has heard and accepted Christ’s invitation to dine with Him, and has dined with Christ, and is still dining with Jesus as a lifestyle. True Christianity is an ongoing feasting on Jesus, and feasting with the living Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

What is the kingdom of God like? Among other things, you can count on it that, in one way or another, feasting, eating and nourishing diet will be

featured in the kingdom. To Jesus, the kingdom of God is certainly not like a drab church service or funeral service. Jesus tells many parables to illustrate the kingdom of God, and yet, Jesus' illustrations will sound unrealistic to many. Jesus' impression about the Kingdom of God is all upbeat, joyful, groovy, and exciting. Extravagant parties, merriment, finding hidden treasures, discovering something exceedingly valuable you'd sell your life investment to purchase it, family and invited guests at the party, bedecked brides and bridal party waiting for the bridegroom, food, and drinks. Things such as these are the benefits Jesus provided.

Apart from the parables of the kingdom, what we see and read is a fun-loving, party-going Jesus, in a sharp contrast to His contemporary joy-killer religious freaks. We are not talking about an opulent, lavish, luxurious and affluent Jesus that today's "claim it and receive it; wealth and prosperity" preachers try to make Him to be, but a winsome, relaxed, friendly, charismatic, enigmatic and authentic Being. At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus was invited to a wedding, and He went, despite His busy schedule. The Pharisees, though they disagreed with Jesus and sought His downfall, they found Him an authentic person and often invited Jesus and His disciples to their homes for dinner, and Jesus took time to go. On some occasions, Jesus did not wait to be invited to dinner; He preempted the host, as in Zacchaeus, a much maligned and hated tax collector, and invited Himself into his house and company (Luke 19).

Fun loving, Feasting and Partying Jesus and Parables of His Kingdom

Check these out. This might not be the Jesus you've been told in the church. This was how the Jesus of the New Testament lived, and this was how the Jesus I'm drawn to spoke about the kingdom of God using illustrations to which His listeners could relate to.

First, the fun-loving, feasting, and partying Jesus; hospitable and enjoying hospitality:

- “On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding,” (Jn. 2:1, 2).
- “Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee’s house, and sat down to eat,” (Lk. 7:36).
- “And as He spoke, a certain Pharisee asked Him to dine with him. So He went in and sat down to eat,” (Lk. 11:37).
- “Now it happened, as He [Jesus] went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath, that they watched Him closely,” (Lk. 14:1).
- “Then Levi gave Him [Jesus] a great feast in his own house. And there were a great number of tax collectors and others who sat down with them. And their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, ‘Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’” (Lk. 5:29, 30).
- “Then they said to Him [Jesus], ‘Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?’” (Lk. 5:33).
- “When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. ‘Zacchaeus!’ he said. ‘Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today.’ (Lk. 19:5; NLT).
- “Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at table with Him,” (Jn. 12:1, 2).
- “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ But wisdom is justified by her children,” (Matt. 11:18, 19).

Next, here are samples of His parables of the kingdom of God with exciting similes:

- “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field,

which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

- “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it... (Matt. 13:44, 45, 46).
- “The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come. Again, he sent out other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, ‘See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding.’” (Matt. 22:2-4).
- “Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. (Matt. 25:1-4).
- “For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.” (Matt. 26:28, 29).
- “And when he [the shepherd] has found it [the lost sheep], he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.” (Luke 15:5-7).
- And, in the last book of the Bible, we read of a wedding in heaven: “Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.” And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me,

“Write: ‘Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’ ” And he said to me, “These are the true sayings of God.” (Rev. 19:7-9).

Did you notice anything drab and dull? Even the first miracle Jesus performed was at a wedding, and there, at Cana of Galilee, Jesus turned water into wine (John 2:1-12). Why? It was for keeping the party going, nonstop! The examples of Jesus’ illustrations of the kingdom of God include lavish and expensive parties such that only kings could afford for an heir apparent, wedding celebrations, scenes of joy and happiness after restoration of family relationships or recovery of some lost fortunes. No wonder, in the text above, our key verse, the end goal is a party, a dining together with the King. I believe many early believers carried this to a ridiculous extent and the apostle Paul had to correct them in Romans 14:16-18, and redirected their attention to the essence of the Kingdom when he wrote, “Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men.”

Please read that verse again and consider with me these few points for us to ponder upon.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me (Rev. 3:20).

1. *The Big Problem: Christ is on the other side of the door.* Christ is not in the church! What an oxymoron. It’s like saying the tenants have locked the landlord out of his own house and now the landlord is standing outside, knocking the door and begging to be let in. Let’s see the context: Read Revelation 3:14-22. The members of the church at Laodicea were complacent, lukewarm, indifferent, worldly, churchy but without Christ. After exposing their hypocrisy and lukewarm attitude, then Jesus encouraged and pleaded with

those church members to turn again to Him. He said, *“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock...”* and He reminded them that He was waiting at the door, knocking, (vv. 19, 20a). Like the Laodiceans, many today are busy doing “church” and caring not that they have no contact with Jesus, the true Life. The fleeting, temporal pleasures of the world, such as, money, security, and material possessions can be dangerous, because they can make us indifferent to eternal things, as is the case of the Laodicean church. There are many who go to church every Sunday who, at the same time, have shut Christ out of their lives—one leg in the world, one leg in the church. This is not the way things should be, but it is the way they are.

2. *“Behold!”* The attention-catching announcement: Behold! Listen! Listen up! Look! Lo! Here I am! As we may say in today’s language, Hello! Hey! Knock-knock. Christ was trying to get their attention as He seeks to get your attention today. You’ve been running away from God all your life and God has been chasing after you and seeking you. What will it take for Christ to get your attention? A burning bush like Moses? How many more wakeup calls do you need? Just think for a minute. This program may be another of Christ’s effort to get you to pause, stop and listen.
3. *“I stand at the door.”* The Christ seeks relationship. From the beginning of beginnings, from Genesis, God has been seeking fallen and sinful humanity. For example, in Genesis 3:9, God called to Adam, *“Where are you?”* The Bible is not a record of our search for God but of God’s search for us. Christ declares that He has come to seek and to save the lost—Luke 19:10. These people were already doing religion. They were having church without Christ. As many do today, they were singing “praise and worship songs” to a god they know only by name, or second-hand report, but not by experience. Christ did not offer them religion but fellowship, a personal relationship with God. Religion is our own efforts to find God or to

please Him. Yet, such efforts are futile. We can find religion and we can find spirituality, but we cannot find relationship with the living Almighty God in our own effort, or outside of Christ.

Left to ourselves we are not able to properly discern our spiritual needs and search for God in the right way and right places. We need God—His convicting, pleading, and wooing Holy Spirit—to feel our need, yearning and search in the right ways. The Bible details God’s search and longing for us. Genesis, the first book of the Bible, and Revelation, the last book of the Bible, both share many common themes. In Genesis 3 we read God’s search for Adam after he sinned. God roamed the Garden and yelled, “Adam, where are you?” To which Adam replied that he had heard sound of God in the Garden but was afraid and hiding, because he had suddenly discovered himself naked (Gen. 3:8-10). Here, in the last book of the Bible, we find God again searching for humanity. Jesus is standing at the door, knocking, seeking to be invited in to live and share with the occupant.

4. *“I stand at the door and knock.”* This is the God who knocks. This is another oxymoron. If He is the Omnipotent, All-powerful God, why does He knock? Who can resist or refuse the Almighty God? Christ stands, knocks, and waits for an invitation to come in, because God respects human freedom and dignity. God will not force Himself on anyone. God gives each one the choice to open our hearts to Him or do otherwise. Jesus is at the door knocking, still knocking. He is persistent. He wants to fellowship with you. Yet, at the same time, He is a gentleman. He will not break in or use force. He uses reason and love. God allows you to decide whether you want Him in your life or not. Unfortunately, the door to the human heart is the only door that opens only from the inside, not from the outside. If you don’t open, it remains closed; even closed to God! No one can open it for you.
5. *“If.”* This is the hinge between this side and that side of the door—

the hinge between life and death. This is the conditional word that makes all the difference—“If...” There are hundreds of “if” conditional promises in the Bible—2 Chron. 7:14; 2 Cor. 5:17; John 15:7, etc. For example, 1 John 1:9—*“If we confess our sins...”* God is willing to forgive but we must do our part—“confess.” Again, note John 8:31—*“If you abide in My word, you are my disciples indeed.”* My favorite is 2 Corinthians 5:17—*“If anyone is in Christ...”* Here, Christ says, *“If anyone hears My voice...”* Are you listening? Are you ignoring His knock? Have you shut your heart to anything of Christ? Some of you are comfortable with religion. Religion gives you a respectable standing in the society; it provides opportunity for wedding and burial. However, Christ is not in your life. As a preacher warns: *Don't go to hell on a church bus!* Don't be uncommitted. Don't be neither here nor there like the Laodicean church.

The first mention of a word in the Scriptures, referred to as the principle of first mention, is often indicative of its meaning and later use of that word in other parts of the Scriptures. For example, the first mention of the word, door, in the Bible is in Genesis 4:7, where God sounded a warning to Cain. *“If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.”* The verse opens with the conditional preposition, “if” just alluded to. *“If you do well...”* (7a) Cain had options; he had a choice, but he chose to do evil, which compounded his initial error. Verse 7b also continues the conditional promise and warning for disobedience, *“And if you do not do well.”* The consequence of disobedience: *“sin lies at the door,”* (7b). Here, the word, door, is first mentioned in the Bible and it has nothing to do with a physical house or residence. But it bears the same sense of “entry point,” “invitation,” “access,” “decision making,” or “knocking,” as in Rev. 3:20. Unfortunately, Cain opened the door to sin. The doorway is the point of decision, this

way or that way, in or out, open or shut. God warned Cain, “*Sin is crouching at your door*” (NIV); Jesus said to the church, “*I stand at the door and knock.*” Same door; the door of your heart and life. What’s it going to be for you with Jesus standing at the door of your heart knocking today?

6. “*If anyone hears My voice.*” God’s invitation is impartial and inclusive: ANYONE! You don’t have to be rich; you don’t have to speak Hebrew or Greek or Arabic; you don’t have to belong to any elite group; you don’t have to be young or old. Anyone! You just have to be anyone. Whosoever—that’s John 3:16. Anyone, whosoever, regardless of whatever you’ve done or failed to do, God’s voice beckons you to “Invite the Lord Jesus into your life.” In the afterlife, no damned soul is ever going to be able to accuse God, saying, “God, I wanted to be saved, but You didn’t elect me,” because God’s invitation is an open invitation to “anyone,” and “whosoever” (Jn. 3:16). This invitation to whosoever or anyone either overrides all theological pretensions and debates about election and predestination versus free will and human choice, or, at least, lets God off the hook. The conditional conjunction, “if” put the outcome squarely on the human’s part.
7. “*And opens the door.*” This is a task anyone can do. Just open the door to your heart and life. The power is in your hand. The choice is yours to make. You can say “yes” or “no” to God, again. You really are the boss; you have the key. Inviting Jesus into your life is as simple as praying, “**Lord Jesus, I repent of my sinful ways. I open the door of my life and heart to You. Come into my life today, Lord Jesus. I make You my Lord and Savior.**”
8. “*I will come in to him.*” God is not playing hide and seek with us. This is a promise you can take to the bank. Christ promises, “*I will come in to him.*” He will, if you invite Him in. Christ always keeps His part of the promise. It has been said that there’s a God-shaped vacuum in every life, which only Christ can fill. Nothing else in

your life can take the place of Christ. Drugs, sex, alcohol, money, fame, or whatever cannot fill that vacuum, only Christ by His Spirit. God made us for Himself—Revelation 4:11—and our lives are meaningful only when we find Christ—“*Christ in you, the hope of glory,*” (Colossians 1:27). “*It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me,*” (Galatians 2:20). “*If anyone is in Christ,*” not if anyone is in the church, “*he is a new creation; old things have passed away, behold, all things become new,*” (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are not reformed or refurbished. We are transformed and changed. We are “born from above,” (John 3:3, 7; CEV). The relationship is a mystery, because when you are in Christ, Christ is also in you.

9. “*And dine with him.*” God seeks fellowship with us. This is the Christ who “walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am His own.” This is Christ who dines with me. This is Christ who comes into my house and to my office. This is the Christ who will always be with me and will never leave me nor forsake me. This is the best companion I need in life.
10. “*And he with Me.*” Banquet with the King. This is the final invitation and promise to those who heed His invitation to come into their lives and become a part of their lives. They have reserved seats to dine with Christ in His kingdom. The King is coming again.

Will you let Christ into your life and heart? Or, will you continue to keep Him at the door of your heart knocking, knocking, knocking, and seeking to enter and be resident in your life? Don't keep the King knocking to no avail. If you do, someday, you will be the one on the outside knocking and Christ will reply from the inside, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness,” (Matthew 7:23). Does Christ know you as one of His?

The word, if, is not only about conditional promises but also a preposition for regret, as in “If I had known.” Martha and Mary were the sisters of Lazarus, the man lying in his grave. When Lazarus was sick, the sisters had sent word to Jesus expecting Him to come over as soon as He got the mes-

sage. Their home had been like a second home to Jesus, because He and His disciples had often eaten dinners there. The invitation was for Jesus to come and heal His friend, but Jesus did not show up until His friend was four days in the tomb. Consider this mournful statement of the two sisters to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died,” (John 11:21, 32). They regretted Jesus did not act soon enough. Thankfully, it was a regret that had a remedy, because Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. What would be worse and irredeemable is for someone to look back over his/her life and regretfully and mournfully say, “If only I had believed Christ! How things might have been different, how my destiny could have changed.” Please don’t put yourself in a position where you could be that regretful person. Again, the choice is yours.

Down the Memory Lane: Musing and Mulling³⁸

This Is My Story; This Is My Song...

Part I: SCM—THE JOURNEY BEGINS

I'm thankful for the input of my predecessor and past president of the Student Christian Movement (SCM) Unife, Brother Segun Adefolaju, who helped tweak my memory on some details. By the 1974/75 academic session when I was admitted to the University of Ife (Unife, for short), the SCM was experiencing an upswing on many levels, including membership, for various reasons. Jesus had said to His disciples, "Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! ...I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors," (John 4:35c, 38). "The field... [that was] already white for harvest," in this case, was the youth on campuses. Truly, as Jesus said, "others have labored, and [we] have entered into their labors." Many Christian laborers in the Unife SCM had labored and many were still laboring hard at that time. Borrowing from some lines of the Nigerian anthem, I could say, "the labors of our [brethren] past", thankfully, were not "in vain."

However, I have restrained myself from mentioning names unless the storyline necessitated it, for two reasons. One, obviously I would inadvertently omit some names that deserved mentioning. Two, some members, especially

38. This chapter was born while writing what was supposed to be a half page to a one-page appendix as info for Auntie Wanle Memorial Foundation/Back to Basics Ministry. Yet, it took a life of its own and took me down memory lane, "musing and mulling." Hence, the title, "Down the Memory Lane: This is my story; this is my song." I pray it turns out to be a good read. My generation has a story to tell, and it is God's story, or the story of God working in and through the least qualified to achieve God's purpose so the glory could be God's alone.

sisters and senior friends, might not be officers in the SCM, might not sing in the choir or act in drama group, or be seen arranging chairs for Bible study or holding a microphone to address the group but their very association with the SCM had a normalizing effect for many who were either considering becoming Christians or joining the SCM. Today, we call them influencers. Their affiliation or membership, in a way, dignified and added credibility to the SCM, which had once been stigmatized as a Society for Courtship and Marriage. In short, my generation inherited a Movement on the rise, and we built on it.

Not to play a comparison game, which I never intended to, the Evangelical Christian Union (ECU) was comparatively larger than the SCM in my early years in Unife. Incidentally, this turned out to be an indirect blessing and unintended advantage for the SCM. Many matriculated Christian students who did not want to be “lost in the crowd,” those who sought opportunity for some visibility to use their gifts in service for Christ, and those who desired more intimate fellowship, gravitated toward the SCM after a back-and-forth between the ECU and SCM. One past SCM president, with whom I squatted with one year, told me that he had joined the SCM and taken more active roles so that “this brother may not kill himself.” By “this brother” he was referring to brother Gbenga Ewejobi, who had SCM flowing through his veins, and whom he had seen busy laboring and toiling night and day for the SCM.

My story wasn't different either. I was attending both the SCM and ECU, during my freshman year, as much as I could, still undecided to which to throw my loyalty. After barely few weeks, Brother Caleb Adeodun—of blessed memory, who I mentioned in the prologue—approached me and informed me that at the previous executive meeting of the SCM he had been elected as the Bible study leader and I had been elected as the assistant Bible study leader. He also told me that few officials in the meeting had known my name—that's indicative of how fresh I was—but they all identified me by my contributions, what I wore and where I sat during the past Bible study sessions. Bless his heart, Brother Caleb then told me that officially he would

be the Bible study leader, but unofficially I was to be the leader and he would be my assistant.

Brother Caleb was my brother, friend and mentor who pushed me on many levels. Without prior notice or instruction, he could put me on the spot to lead Bible study or to preach in the prison. If I attempted to protest, he would then remind me, or encourage me, with what was possibly his most favorite scripture where God had said, “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it,” (Psa. 81:10c). He was the typical “old school” Christian man of a different era. I could write a whole chapter of many hilarious and borderline chauvinistic human-interest stories on Brother Caleb. He and I worked and served together in other subgroups beyond the year we were co-leaders of the Bible study subgroup. Short in stature with a baby face we had no idea how old he was until he graduated and was exempted from serving in the National Youth Service Corps due to his age.

The establishment of the Jesus Power House, during the regime of Brother Ayodeji Diya, which was made open to all Christians, was obviously a major barrier breaker between the SCM and ECU. It soon became a melting pot for Christians. This later blossomed into deeper relationships culminating in a joint crusade to the University. The Jesus Power House, an SCM initiative, was a space provided within the hall of residence through the grace of the residential hall administrators. It was the first space on the campus that served as a Christian library, resource center, prayer house, executive or subgroup meetings, private study and prayer. Many similar spaces later followed owned by other Christian groups.

In my student days in SCM,³⁹ Unife (Sept. 1974-June 1979), I was blessed to witness God stretching us and working in and through us to develop our natural skills, spiritual talents and ministries. Many vibrant and blossoming subgroups resulted from this. These subgroups will be called ministry groups today. We had SCM sub-groups that included the following:

39. If you recall, in the first chapter of Book I, I had shared stories about my conversion in 1972 and how I became the president—the first lay person to be president—of the SCM in my high school, Ilora Baptist Grammar School, Ilora-Oyo.

Teach Them

- School Visitation Team (initiating and/or visiting SCM branches in high schools in neighboring towns and villages and organizing free boarding Christian holiday camps),
- Village Evangelism Team (visiting villages for open air evangelism and evangelistic film showing),
- Prison Visitation Team (visiting the Prison in town to hold services and Bible studies for inmates),
- Redemption Singers (outreach to the campus as well as a traveling gospel musical band),
- Drama Group or Redemption Theater (outreach through drama on campus and elsewhere, such as the staging a play for the State Television during Easter),
- Christian Library (tagged Jesus Power House; a space of refuge, prayer, study and meetings),
- Prayer Band/Warriors—a team of committed intercessors who regularly prayed with fasting,
- Choir, to minister in songs during fellowship meetings, special programs such as evangelistic crusades, on invitations such as Radio programs, Christmas Carols, or in the university chapel services
- Publicity; responsible for designing and printing posters, handbills, banners, billboards (sometimes “walking billboards”), fliers for special events and posting/pasting them over the campus,
- Street Evangelism Team (visiting Ife township to evangelize on the streets or organize a city-wide open-air evangelistic crusades), etc.

I was privileged to serve the SCM in various capacities, such as, Bible Study Leader, Organizing Secretary, and President, as well as initiate, lead or serve many of its subgroups in various capacities such school visits, acting in the drama group, rhythm guitarist/leader of the Redemption Singers, etc. [I was encouraged by brother Gbenga Ewejobi—one of the names on my dedication page—that we should both learn to play guitar as a tool for ministry,

but he quit after setting me in motion. I also took interest in playing guitar, because I thought (and how wrong I was) that ladies liked men who were musical]. Initially, the SCM subgroups were traveling to places to minister using public transportation and borrowed cars—cars borrowed from SCM Senior Friends. The Senior Friends who owned cars were usually post graduate students, Christian lecturers, or other staff members. The SCM later bought its own bus—a brand new 25-seater coaster bus for its outreach ministries, with this emblazoned on its side: THE STUDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT OF NIGERIA, UNIFE BRANCH. I had the honor of being its first driver; I drove the bus from the sales garage in Ibadan to the campus of the University of Ife, Ile Ife. (As an alumnus of the institution, all things considered, the slogan, “Great Ife!” cannot be discounted as an empty student chant).

In the SCM Unife, the closing song, prayer and benediction during fellowship rarely signaled the end of group meetings. Thereafter, clusters of groups of threes, fours and fives would linger behind for chitchat and camaraderie. It was not uncommon for a brother to “invite himself” to visit a sister in her dorm for a snack or meal from the sister’s largess; sometimes the brother was hungry for more than physical food. Through this gesture, he might be laying a Gideon’s fleece, (Jud. 6:36-40), to discern the possibility of a future emotional lifelong partnership with the sister. Our sisters were not naïve either; they knew when to encourage and when to politely (or bluntly) discourage any unsolicited advance. (By the way, in old school fashion, we called each other with the prefix: “Brother” or “Sister” So-and-so).

After a weekly Bible study or Prayer meeting you could hear a brother enthusiastically give an open invitation to all for FFF in his room or in the common room of his hall. We all knew what that meant; it meant he had materials for food, fun and fellowship (FFF) and was inviting whosoever to partake of his blessing. Most likely, provisions had come for him and he probably had some big loaves of bread, cans of sardines or Geisha, juice, eggs, some biscuits, milk, and tea products. Brothers would congregate in his dorm or room for food, fun and fellowship. Other brothers would likely

bring whatever they had to supplement. Without doubt, the unbelieving roommates or students in adjacent rooms couldn't help but witness Christian love and mutual generosity in action. The following week it would be another brother who would gleefully make the same announcement for FFF (food, fun and fellowship) after the group's Bible study/Prayer meeting. Unbeknown to us, this was also the time of discipleship for younger Christians when they had the open invitation to gather around and hobnob with older Christians. (Many years later a university professor and a local church pastor wrote or said to me that as young Christians on campus then they were "followed up," implying mentored, in those FFF gatherings.) That was when we were enmeshed in Apostle Paul's benediction of grace, love and communion of the Triune God. It was the time we all truly experienced "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit," (2 Cor. 13:14).

The Evangelical Christian Union (ECU) and the SCM, though two different and separate Christian groups on the campus worked together more like sister groups than rival groups. If there had been such a thing as registered staunch members or card-holding members (there was no such thing, though) of any particular group even those so-called staunch members attended and participated in the Bible studies, prayer meetings and other events of the other group. Noticeably, especially in the ECU/SCM drama and musical groups you could almost talk of them as joint ventures. Faces and individuals you could think of as loyal ECU members could play leading roles in an SCM drama, and vice versa. I was always featured in ECU drama, and sometimes playing a leading role, though I was an SCMer (that's the shorthand for SCM members). On occasions, the musicians, especially guitarists and drummers, in the different groups often rehearsed or performed together.

Each Christian group had an annual evangelical outreach to Unife campus. Regardless of affiliation, Christians from all groups joined the prayer band and teamed up for following up of new converts after the event. This initiated the onset of all Christian groups on campus coming together annually to have a joint Christian evangelistic outreach, so we could all speak

with one voice as Jesus' followers to all on the campus. One year comes to mind though I cannot remember which year. For the evangelistic outreach the Unife Joint Christian Outreach (or whatever name we tagged it) invited the flamboyant, miracle and prosperity preacher, Archbishop Benson Idahosa. The days went well, and many students gave their lives to Christ, who died and rose again that "they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly," (Jn. 10:10b). Immediately following the outreach days were several days for intensive Christian teaching, as follow up for grounding the new converts. Guess who had been invited to handle that. Brother W. F. Kumuyi, the celebrated holiness and rule-based righteousness preacher; "holiness, without which no one will see the Lord," (Heb. 12:14b). At that time, Brother Kumuyi—who later became the founding pastor of the Deeper Life Ministries/Bible Church—an ascetic by every standard, could count the number of usable pants (or pairs of trousers), white and blue short-sleeved shirts and leather sandals (not shoes) that he had and owned on the fingers on his hands—possibly, with two or three fingers left idle.

If there were ever extreme opposites on a spectrum, or far out left and far out right in outlook and ministry, Kumiyi and Idahosa were extreme opposites of each other. The reasoning of the planning committee could have been to present a balanced or all-sides' view of Christianity to the converts, but the question that began to float in the air was: What were they thinking? It brought untold confusion to the new converts. The young Christians could not tell who was right and who to believe: the flamboyant, miracle-working, partygoer and opulent Jesus of Idahosa or the frugal, strict, killjoy, drab Jesus of Kumuyi. (Please understand that this has nothing to do with either Idahosa or Kumuyi. I said things as they were. Idahosa is now with the Church Triumphant; and Kumuyi and the Deeper Life Church have morphed into a different persona and a new image quite different from those early days of "Deeper Life Retreat" in the 70s.)

SCM—the Handmaid of the Church

In their wisdom, according to the SCM handbook, the founding fathers of the SCM envisioned the group as “the handmaid of the Church.” That phrase had traditionally been interpreted and explained to mean that the SCM is not a church but seeks to help with the ministry of the church. We understood it that way and it was customary to find many SCMerS working closely with the chapel or chaplain in their various institutions. The motto of the SCM of Nigeria is, “That All May Be One,” from Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17. That was Jesus’ most ardent desire: love and unity of His followers. It was His last recorded prayer before His arrest and crucifixion.

Many years after we graduated, several past presidents and former leaders of the Unife SCM were mandated to visit the group in Unife, because the group was turning to, or had turned itself into, a church. I cannot remember what year it was and how many of us past presidents and leaders went on that mission, but I remember that Brother Dele Otaniyi was one of us. Dele Otaniyi (of blessed memory) was the SCM president after my term, and it was during his tenure that the SCM purchased the 25-seater coastal bus. He is the “Gideonite” on my dedication page, because he was very active in the Gideon’s (Bible) Ministry until the Lord called him home.

It was a fruitless exercise trying to reason with these teenagers over that weekend. (I kid you not; many of them were teenagers who, *ceteris paribus*, in two or three years might be standing before any of us with a job application form.) It was nauseating, to say the least, witnessing SCM members curtsying, genuflecting, and hearing them address their teenage leaders—their fellow students—as “Pastor,” “Daddy,” “Mummy,” “Overseer,” etc. titles that many church denominations use for their leaders. The argument of the current leadership was that other Christian groups on campuses were becoming churches or operating like churches and it was time to take the SCM “to the next level.” This much I remember: During our final discussions on the Sunday of our weekend visit when I realized we were getting nowhere, because they had made up their minds what to do, I turned to Dele Otaniyi and said something to this effect: “Let’s go home. It’s their turn—they have

the ball now. Let's just be happy that we played our part and we played the ball the best way we thought according to the rules during our time."⁴⁰

If I am not mistaken, it was in the late 80s and 90s, that the nature of student Christian ministry on campuses started changing or had changed quite a lot. Many church denominations, realizing the impact of youth and college students and how much they could achieve in and for their church or denomination, sought to have a foothold on campuses. Virtually every church denomination of worth had its branch in the universities. What used to be two interdenominational Christian fellowships serving as umbrella organizations for students from all Christian denominational backgrounds had disintegrated into countless factions. Notably, the two groups catering for all denominations were SCM and ECU (Evangelical Christian Union), in universities and colleges or SCM and SU (Scripture Union) in high schools. The Baptist Students Fellowship (BSF) was the exception, because most campuses had a BSF presence in their midst. The point could be raised—and maybe it had been raised and argued—that if the Baptist denomination had Baptist Students Fellowship on university campuses, why couldn't other churches and denominations have a students' branch of their church/denomination on campuses? I leave history to be the judge of that. Most of the time, past university presidents and leaders of these groups—SCM and ECU—eventually became pastors or leaders of their various church denominations after graduation—which was a good thing or commendable progression. In fact, many of us look back to our days in SCM/ECU as our training ground or launching pad for future ministry assignments.

Right from high school leading into tertiary institutions, we used to

40. An update on the situation was given in December 2020 by the Executive Secretary, Mr. Dare Ajongbo, at the National Headquarters of the SCM. He reported that the SCM Unife is still part of the mainstream and is fully involved in both sectoral and national programs. Yet, it is a shadow of its old self; a fellowship of over 800 membership now struggling to survive with a membership of less than 40 students. He said there was a mass exodus caused by some of their so-called "rebellious leaders" who have now established churches around Ife. I learned the return to a semblance of normalcy began when another group of SCM OAU/Unife alumni intervened in the past four years and appointed Prof. Funke Bello as one of the fellowship patrons and chairperson of the alumni group.

have students from different religious backgrounds—Baptist, Methodist, Anglican, CAC, Presbyterian, Indigenous Pentecostals, etc. all gathered as an inter-or-nondenominational group for Bible study, prayer and evangelistic programs. Now, a proliferation of churches is occurring on campuses of institutions of higher learning. The current banners and nomenclatures on Nigerian higher educational campuses are Baptist Student Fellowship, Methodist Students Union, CAC Students Fellowship, Four Square Gospel Students Association, The Redeemed Christian Church of God Students Union, Mountain of Fire Students Group, The Deeper Life Bible Church Students Organization, etc. The result was nothing more than the modern-day Tower of Babel—or, worse!

From cradle to the grave you go through life, academic and professional institutions, wearing the blindfold of your church, never knowing what goes on in other churches, too scared or intimidated to venture to be inquisitive or stretch beyond your religious comfort zone. As in politics, so in religion: we demonize what we don't know, what we fear out of ignorance, and we dehumanize those we perceive as our enemies or competitors. How you can call that a university (or tertiary) education beats me. They have a phrase for that: they call it half-baked education, meaning that you passed through the university, but the university did not pass through you. There's no thought transformation or rethinking over many years of sitting passively in classrooms. No change, no growth, because growth does not happen without a change. You added years and acquired diplomas but never matured. There is no critical thinking. You never learned to ask the right question, or to question at all. You read 1 Corinthians 13:11 the wrong way, in your own way. This is how you twisted the passage: "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I PERFECTED CHILDISH THINGS," (emphasis mine).

Evangelist (Dr.) T. L. Osborn/Archbishop Benson Idahosa/Pa. S. G. Elton

Another noteworthy thing happened in the mid-70s, in 1974 (thanks to Google search, because I could not remember the exact year). That year, the Evangelist (Dr.) T. L. Osborn, an American Pentecostal evangelist, singer, author and teacher, whose ministry was based in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was invited to hold crusades in Benin City, Nigeria by the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa. Pa. S. G. Elton was a spiritual father to Archbishop Idahosa. T. L. Osborn Foundation brought equipment and resources worth millions of dollars to Nigeria to equip and empower the churches. They include minivans, 4-wheel drive rugged trucks, tons of evangelical tracts and thousands of copies of his books, 16-mm film projectors, countless reels of Osborn films, especially his evangelistic crusade films, generators to power projectors, and many more. These were freely distributed to whosoever pastor/church or Christian organization that participated by the Church of God Mission/Archbishop Benson Idahosa Ministries. I know struggling gospel churches and pastors that their ministries got on a fast lane after receiving some of these resources.

We—the SCM Unife—inherited a 16mm reel-to-reel projector, a generator to power the projector, and many of T.L. Osborn's crusade films. These energized our on-campus evangelism and also took our schools and villages ministries to a higher level. We later purchased additional projectors and generators. From the late 70s, several American faith preachers whose books and ministries were later introduced to Nigeria (for profit rather than free distribution) found Nigeria a fertile ground, because they were actually reaping the fruits of the seeds planted by T. L. Osborn Foundation. I am not a historian, or church historian of any sort, but I can say that the T. L. Osborn's visit in mid-70s was significant on many levels. Principally, it trumpeted and galvanized Pentecostalism in Nigeria and elevated it to a new level and forever changed the trajectory of church and church ministry in the country. Believe it or not, today, in Nigeria, more Anglican Priests, Baptist or Methodist ordained ministers in thriving local churches who are graduates

of a Nigerian university are charismatic and/or speak in tongues than their counterparts who do not.

My Theological Reflection on Proliferation of Christian Groups on Campuses

As recorded in both Mark's and John's Gospel accounts, one of Jesus' disciples, John, speaking on behalf of other disciples, said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us," (Mk. 9:38; Jn. 9:49). Please read that verse again and note especially the personal pronouns—"we," and "us." There emerges four plural, personal pronouns in that sentence. Reading in context and between the lines, this comment came shortly after 9 disciples of Jesus had failed in their attempt to heal a boy of his epilepsy or cast out the demons harassing the boy (Mk. 9:18; Jn. 9:40). The boy's father said to Jesus, pathetically, "I implored Your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." The disciples "could not" but this "someone," this unnamed outsider seemed to be getting results while those who ate and slept with Jesus were getting frustrated. The colossal failure of the 9 members of Jesus' entourage could not be discounted as a backdrop to this incident. (We find the accounts of the two incidents contextually in the same chapters of the two Gospels that preserved the stories.) Read the verse again, please. What did they charge the man for? Twice in that sentence they repeated the allegation: "does not follow us." Who are the "us"? This man was a disciple of Jesus, just did not make the cut to be one of the Twelve. He was casting out demons in Jesus' name, which was a bona fide proof that he was united and in partnership with Jesus. Ironically, the disciples proudly reported to Jesus how they handled the situation and how they asserted their right and exclusivity—"we forbade him." Where am I going with this?

I may be wrong, but I believe that the church or denominational leaders were not particularly interested in youth empowerment or youth mobilization; they were interested in protecting what they considered their territory. From reports of all that were happening in Christian groups on campuses

around the country they could see that the youth were already empowered and mobilized. But these things—these great reports—were happening outside the walls of the local churches and outside the control of the established denominations. If unchecked, anything beyond that posed a real threat. What threat? There is the threat to loyalty, allegiance, financial, identity and relevance. To me, that's reminiscent of the old complaint, "Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us." Realizing the great potential of the youth who would soon be business owners, corporate executives, high-level government officials and leaders in the community, the churches/denominations infiltrated the campuses so they could maintain a firm grip on their members and ensure their undivided loyalty to the effect that their tithes and offerings—after graduation—would readily continue to flow into the denominational coffers.

The defunct Christian Students Social Movement (CSSM) of Nigeria, established in summer of 1977, was a testimony to the tremendous potential and impact of Christian youth on campuses. If you ask me, I will tell you that the CSSM self-destructed for two reasons: one, in seeking to promote social change, it dabbled heavily into politics, and two, it dabbled into politics in the name of God, making itself the kingmaker in a country as diverse and polarized as Nigeria. Who knows? The move by the church (or churches) to capture the fertile minds on campuses might have been well intended but the unintended result speaks for itself, and, as far as I am concerned, negates any potential gains. I may be wrong but, if I am partially right, then, I leave you with what the resurrected Jesus said to the church at Ephesus: "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works..." (Rev. 2:5a).

I can only pray that the fresh winds of the 70s will blow again, over me, over us, and ultimately, over Nigeria.

Because human nature was rife with carnality and selfishness, those days—the 70s—were not perfect or even spiritual. We have many things of which to repent. Especially, some Christian leaders might need repenting of

their excessive emphasis on the spectacular and phenomenal in God's name with unverified, exaggerated, and embellished stories that scored very high on manipulations and very low on integrity. Admittedly hope, optimism, potentiality, opportunity, and possibility—essential ingredients in individual and national life—were in good supply in the air. As a nation, with those ingredients and the wind of revival that was blowing we could have conquered discrimination, sectarianism, tribalism, and nepotism that were already showing their ugly heads. We could, yes, we could have surmounted the ugly isms except that no one factored in the power and influence of Mammon, the devil of covetousness. ABBA's most-celebrated heartbreak breakup song title, "The Winner Takes It All" never meant much until the Nigerian emerging era of oil boom. In the era of Nigerian oil boom Mammon, the demon of covetousness, was the winner that took it all, and it left the rest bleeding, breathless, and lifeless. Jesus had warned, "You cannot serve God and mammon," (Matt. 6:24d). Mammon got in the way and the rest is history.

Part II: AJC—THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

Back then, the Advertisers of Jesus Christ (AJC) would put a 2 inches by 2 inches ad in a national Sunday newspaper advertising something Jesus could do for you or Jesus offered to you as well as a scripture promise for it and the invitation to write the AJC office to request further detail. Sometimes, the advert is larger than 2" by 2" for the same price in regional newspapers with lesser national circulation. For the most part, the ad looked like this text box, below:

Are you lost?
JESUS SAVES
For "whoever calls on the name of the Lord
shall be saved" (Romans 10:13).
For details, write: Advertisers of Jesus Christ,
PMB XXX, Ilesha, Nigeria

I never believed anyone noticed much less showed interest until I got to the AJC office as a counselor in 1977. The AJC office and scanty staff had been inundated with piles and piles of letters from all over the nation requesting details on several issues that Jesus had been proclaimed (or advertised) could do. It was overwhelming. Each letter was a soul in need; a soul that had reached out for help to a little-known organization in response to a little newspaper ad that boldly proclaimed Jesus as the answer to their needs. I was nursing self-inflicted wounds of a self-induced failure that summer, the type of failure I never experienced before in my life (no space for details here) when I arrived at the AJC headquarters.

Working at the AJC and my fellowship with the chairman and his family—the Bola Sanni family (because I stayed in their guest room)—helped me on my recovery path. I was not the self-assured, mature Christian that those who recommended me had in mind; rather, I was a broken, beaten down person poring over hundreds of letters from around the nation written by broken lives. It was what I needed to get out of myself. It was at AJC that I cut my teeth writing letters to answer specific requests on biblical issues. Due to the volume of daily mails following the weekly ads, form letters became the way to go. Because requests could be grouped into categories, we resorted to cyclostyled informational pages (for those who are old enough to remember Gestetner cyclostyling machines), then tracts and later booklets to accompany individual letters to the seeker. For us, and for me, those were the early days of mass media technology and mass mailing.

AJC staff had prayer time daily at work and a monthly all-day prayer and fasting retreat on a Saturday, most times away from the office in a local church or on a nearby mountain side or a retreat ground, when and where non-staff members and friends of AJC from far and near participated. We broke our fast together before departing after about 8 hours of praising and worshipping God, praying, and interceding for the world, encouraging and challenging one another from scriptures. The all-day prayers on the mountains or secluded places were my fondest memories of AJC. However, for geographical reasons I became less involved physically from the mid-eighties.

The Defunct Christian Students Social Movement of Nigeria, (CSSM)⁴¹

Upfront, I'd like to introduce this section with a hypothetical scenario. The whole world grieved and mourned the passing of Mr. Year 2020. Though he affected every person worldwide one way or another, each grieved and mourned differently, because he was multifaceted, nondiscriminatory, and meant different things to different people groups. It was one funeral, the passing of Mr. Year 2020, but many visceral and authentic reactions. The families that lost loved ones due to the Corona Virus that came with Mr. Year 2020 had a different response than the restaurateurs and small business owner who lost their sources of livelihood from prolonged lockdowns. The mask and sanitizer makers mourned differently than the coffin makers. The undertakers and coroners grieved differently from the frontline health workers. The storefront local church pastor had a different response than the mega church pastor. Civil servants and government employees who never experienced a pay cut, furlough or layoff had different stories from airhostesses and airline pilots. Scientists and pharmaceutical companies had a different take than that of classroom teachers and educators. The 9-year old who struggled with loneliness and misery over the loss of social contact with peers, the privilege of playtime in the yard, camaraderie of friends and mates in school, cou-

41. Since it was never my intention to distort the truth or misrepresent facts I contacted several key participants in the leadership of the CSSM—I sent this entire chapter to them by email attachment—but none was forthcoming as to why the organization dissolved and did not survive whatever had threatened its demise. I was forced to decide whether to edit out this rich portion of our national Christian history and youth movement in the 70s and 80s. I decided to go ahead, for posterity sake. From those I contacted I could detect that this was still a sensitive issue or a place in time that's not comfortable for them to revisit. I'm thankful I can be part of a system and yet stand outside that system and take a critical look at it like an outsider—which is what I aim for, as dispassionately as possible. At best, what you are going to read is my personal understanding as a third-party objective observer. Winston Churchill paraphrased the aphorism credited to the Spanish philosopher, George Santayana, when he said, "Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it." It's my prayer that posterity will learn from our successes and not repeat our failures. I sincerely apologize if I am proven wrong on any point or have misrepresented any part. Such was unintentional. Better still, can someone write a rejoinder to tell the other side of the truth? Who knows? There're probably many sides of the truth.

pled with the frustration of remote learning on his tablets that was no longer exciting after the first week, had a different memorial. Some would remember Mr. Year 2020 for many lies, conspiracy theories and alternative truths that with which we were bombarded; others would remember him for the ingrained, sober and mostly uncomfortable truths that he helped to unearth about humanity, politics and neighborliness. Each person's story could not be discounted because it was different from a mainstream version—whatever that was. I had an authentic personal story about the CSSM—it's my story, my side of the truth—and it's what I am about to share. Mr. Year 2020 meant different things to different people across the globe. So is my narrative; it's unique to me.

I probably would have been one of the signers of the original filing documents of the Christian Students Social Movement (CSSM) of Nigeria. Instead, I was nursing the self-inflicted wounds of an academic failure of a type I never dreamt could happen to me. Christian leaders from universities and colleges all over Nigeria had convened in University of Ife for several days of deliberation and formation of the group. Where the meetings were held on Unife campus was in the next block, less than 50 yards from the dorm room where I had buried my head in hiding, ashamed to show my face anywhere. I could hear the lively singing, worshiping and prayers. The nation, Nigeria, was ripe for such a movement and many well-meaning Christian leaders supported the idea. The scope of the projects was far-reaching, and the concept swept many Christian leaders—inside and outside campuses—off their feet. That is, many Christian leaders, except Brother Bola Sanni. This was one of the reasons I highly respected him and considered him one of my mentors. He could read between the lines even when there were no lines and could see or foresee what others couldn't see or imagine. He could detect selfish ambitions, ulterior motives, and manipulations even when they were buried under heavy spiritual talks and uncanny Bible exegesis.

The late Pa. S. G. Elton, one of the early missionaries credited for bringing Pentecostalism into Nigeria, had his headquarters in Ilesha and lived there all his life. He was solidly behind the CSSM, because he was consulted and

briefed at every point. ECU leadership on campuses looked up to Pa. S. G. Elton and valued his mentorship, and the proximity between Ile-Ife and Ilesha was additional blessing to ECU Unife. At least once a year, during installation of new officers of Unife ECU, Pa. S. G. Elton was the regular officiating guest minister to commission and lay hands on the new leaders. Pa. Elton was also a mentor to Brother Bola Sanni. The offices and residences of both Pa. Elton and Bola Sanni in Ilesha were a short distance from each other. Most CSSM meetings were held in Unife, Ile-Ife. Many of the high-level national leaders lived near or in Ife. (Ile-Ife is about 20 kilometers, or less than 30 minutes' drive, to Ilesha.) There were no emails and mobile phones facilities then.

Bola Sanni frequented Pa. Elton's place just as much as the leadership of CSSM did, almost on a daily basis, for one thing or another, even late into the night. Pa. Elton would relate to Brother Bola Sanni what the CSSM leaders had just discussed with him. Brother Bola Sanni would give his insight. God is my witness, Bola Sanni would point out the weaknesses and potential dangers and the need to proceed with caution or not proceed at all. Pa. Elton would see his point, agree with him and promise to bring it up with the CSSM leaders when next they came to him. Later, some members of CSSM would visit Bola Sanni to explain things and reason with him and, especially to recount to him the many reassuring prophecies and revelations but Bola Sanni would maintain his point. This went on back and forth, for all the years I was active in AJC, and was privy to conversations between Bola Sanni and Pa. Elton on CSSM, or roughly till 1980. At the Unife branch level of CSSM, I was invited to, and I did attend, prayer and logistic planning meetings. Often, these meetings were called to seek God's wisdom in response to a national emergency, but I never took an active role.

With marketing as his field and background, when Bola Sanni disagreed with your point of view, he left room for you to know it was okay to agree to disagree and still be best of friends (or brothers and sisters in Christ). I clearly remember one of his illustrations: He would look for any delicate and precious object around—it could be a mug, a pair of glasses, a book, a spoon, a child, anything. He would place the object between the other person and

himself and say something like: “You and I love and care for this object. Yet, we differ on where best to place it. I think it should be placed here so it doesn’t fall off the table and be broken or damaged, but you think over there is the best place for its safety. Neither of us will budge. Somehow, we are absolute as to the rightness of our position. Let’s not forget that we both mean well, and both care passionately for the same precious object. Our disagreement is not because we have been unkind or unfair to each other prior to this time or didn’t like each other, and not because we are people who don’t care. Nothing of such! We disagreed, because we both cared deeply and wanted the best, and no harm or damage, for this object. We could disagree on what place was best and still be respectful of each other and be thankful that we both love and care for the same thing.” By this posture or illustration, Bola Sanni had disarmed you of any animosity though he disagreed with you. I believe this attitude was one of the reasons why some CSSM staff members and leaders that knew of Bola Sanni’s position were still able to turn to him when sorting through their emotional turmoil after the movement fizzled out.

For some reasons, even though some in leadership courted me, gave me special invitations and I sincerely promised to attend and participate at events, I never made it to any of the events and national conventions of the CSSM organization till it was dissolved. (To be honest, I still feel bad I didn’t after I had given my word.) I was never an insider and didn’t know what happened internally for the group that made such a big splash at its inauguration to come to an unceremonious ending. Nonetheless, I know it resulted in a crisis of faith for many who wholeheartedly believed that God was moving and working in and through the organization. I know some of those who had tried to reason with Bola Sanni to see things their way eventually came to his house, confused and in tears. One of the liaison officers of the group who had crisscrossed the country on its behalf lay prostrate on the rug in Bola Sanni’s living room, drained and perplexed, and kept asking, “Can God lie?” again and again.

There had been countless prophecies, visions, dreams, revelations, and reported special visitations and messages from God given to members (and

sympathizers) of the group from across the nation on political issues and all pointing in the same direction. Talk of confirmation; they had plenty of it! There were prophetic utterances in big, Holy Ghost spiritual gatherings given by renowned prophets and prophetesses that corroborated earlier prophecies and revelations. That's what brought the confusion for this person who had served the group and attended the events, listened to, and documented the visions, dreams, and revelations. He would get up from the floor, sit on his knees, dazed, and say again, "In Port Harcourt, God said this... In Kwara State convention so and so prophecies came... In Kaduna, God moved so mightily, and God told us this and that... In Lagos, God gave a revelation to so-and-so about the same issue... Where did we go wrong? Brother Sanni, can God lie? These revelations were confirmed in many ways, repeatedly; can God lie?"

God never lies. Ultimately, the hard and obvious truth was that God was never the author of those prophecies, visions, dreams, revelations on political issues regarding Nigeria all pointing in the same direction. The harder truth was that those ultra-spiritual prophets and dreamers were never God's spokespersons. That's not to suggest that they were not well meaning, Spirit-filled Christians. Consumed with their own desires, their subconscious minds became the fertile grounds for manufacturing dreams and visions and prophecies according to the passionate inclination of their hearts. They were human conjectures camouflaged as divine insights and prophecies. Sadly, like it or not, it's reminiscent of the palace prophets we read in 1st and 2nd Kings who prophesied only what the king wanted to hear. Happily, and thankfully, we are not living under Moses' code in Deuteronomy 13 on dealing with false prophets and false dreamers, or prophets and dreamers whose prophecies and dreams in the name of the Lord did not come true. By and large, they could be sincerely mistaken or could be working for themselves or their own political agenda. Yet, it was a bitter pill for many to swallow. There were leaders amongst them who, to this day, did not change position or admit any remote possibility of being wrong but rationalized that the prophecies did not come true, because God had changed His mind due to the fact that certain persons

did not do their part. Americans have a word for such self-justification: Baloney! Sadly, many Christian youth lost faith, because they didn't know who or what else to believe if these "giant" spiritual leaders they had looked up to, could be so wrong. The CSSM was the in-thing, and it probably would have been a different story for me but for my close association with Bola Sanni then.

It is from this backdrop of CSSM that I gained a better understanding of the politically motivated religious evangelicals (note that I did not say, Christian evangelicals) in American life and politics. In every election year, their big names and prophets keep making a mockery of the faith. If I weren't already a Christian nothing in their brand would have attracted me. They would have been stoned to death, if this was the era of the Old Testament, under Moses' code in Deuteronomy 13 on dealing with false prophets and false dreamers, or prophets and dreamers whose prophecies and dreams in the name of the Lord did not come true. I wrote about this in a free e-book, titled, PULPITS, PEWS AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE US—WHO IS USING WHO?

On a side note, many religious Evangelicals (and faithful Catholics, too) in the United States are known for, and defined by, what they are against, what they don't believe or support than what they believe and support. It makes you wonder what they truly believe, who they really are on the Christian spectrum, and what they stand for or support. I call them, "We Don't" Christians. Such as, "We are Christians (or Catholics); we don't do drugs, we don't fornicate, we don't do orgies and parties, and we don't do rock and roll." That's all; we don't! They are defined by what they don't do than what they do. I could be wrong but I'm certain that many thought leaders and influencers in the Evangelical Movement (and faithful Catholics, too) in the US would endorse, hail as a new messiah, and vote for a modern-day Hitler, if he said, "I'm Hitler. I want you to know that I am on your side. I am against everything you are against. I am against same-sex marriage, I'm against abortion, and I am against the LGBTQ movement," because these religionists are defined by the things they are against than who or what they stand for. It mat-

ters little to them that their political messiah is an avowed racist, misogynist, xenophobia, islamophobia, domestic terrorist, and hedonist.

May this be the day, when the Christians—Evangelicals and Catholics—in the United States of America are known for their stand FOR solving the big problems of the world in the name of Jesus who gave His life to save the world. May we indeed be the Christians—Evangelicals and Catholics—who are embodied by Christ and emboldened by love to stand FOR justice that's not color-coded and not dictated by political expediency. May God make us Christians—Evangelicals and Catholics—of renewed minds and transformed character who stand FOR changing the world by being intentional in making an impact in the life of “one of the least of these,” one person at a time. May God give us Christians—Evangelicals and Catholics—who will not walk by on the other side of a man wounded and bleeding by the roadside, like the priest and levite in the story of the Good Samaritan, but acknowledging that they have been blessed to be a blessing to others, and are stewards of all they are and have, will stop and take a stand FOR helping, healing, and restoration of hope back to the man. May we—Evangelicals and Catholics—be the true reflection of Jesus, the Light of the world, in the world today as we stand FOR the invisible, voiceless and vulnerable of society in the ways Jesus stood FOR them, noticed, touched, affirmed, and empowered them in His day. Amen and Amen.

Part III: EHC—THE ROAD WIDENS

Every Home for Christ (EHC) is a systematic, evangelistic literature saturation ministry with staff and volunteers visiting and placing two gospel tracts in every home (people live in homes)—one for adults and one for children, in a village, town or city, until every home in that geographical area is reached and afforded a gospel witness. The tract for adults was titled: Are You Happy? while the tract for children was titled: He Wants to be Your Friend. Those who make decisions for Christ after reading the tracts, or require further explanations and spiritual help, are encouraged to fill in their names and addresses on the decision slip (which is a tear-off section of the tract), tear it

off and mail it to EHC office for a four-lesson Bible Study correspondence course. This serves as follow up material.

I was sold as soon as I learned of the well-thought out EHC systematic distribution of gospel literature, the Bible correspondence courses in four lessons to follow up new converts and the prayer mobilization and prayer schools as an essential part of the ministry. The philosophy behind the EHC systematic distribution of gospel literature is based on the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand men, not counting women and children. The first thing Jesus did was to organize the crowds to sit in groups of fifties and hundreds—Mark 6: 39, 40, so no one would be served twice, and no one would be missed and not served. That kind of systematic approach to fulfilling the “Go ye therefore...” mandate thrilled me to no end. Those who received the correspondence course were informed that a Certificate of Completion would be mailed to them after completing the four correspondence lessons. Trust me: Nigerians love to acquire certificates and diplomas—even when they know they cannot present them for any gainful employment. There were many who embarked on the course simply for the certification only for them to come to faith during the process of studying.

Knowing that little of spiritual significance would be achieved without prayer the EHC International developed alongside a parallel prayer mobilization and schools of prayer ministry. The present international president of the EHC, Dick Eastman,⁴² author of many books on prayer, was the one who developed the seminars and schools of prayer. In the 80s and 90s, the EHC office staff in Lagos had an hour-long prayer break when we prayed for requests from around the world as well as thank God for testimonies from EHC offices worldwide. As the prayer school director, sometimes together with the EHC national director, the Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo, we traveled by air and by road around the country with our overhead projector and transparency sheets (those were the state-of-the-art technology at the time), and students’ workbooks, to train Christians and mobilize for prayers, lead

42. “No Easy Road” and “The Hour that Changes the World” are two foundational devotional books on prayer by Dick Eastman

prayer seminars, and prayer schools in local churches and Bible schools. Why prayer schools? This was because concerning the same harvest, many chapters before “Go ye therefore...” Jesus had earlier given a “Pray ye therefore...” mandate, (Matt. 9:38; 28:19; KJV). A truly successful and Christ honoring “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations” will not happen without a parallel obedience to “Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest.”

Beginning with my involvement with the Advertisers of Jesus Christ (AJC) in 1977 and continuing with my ministry with the EHC in 1984, writing, literature, or the printed matter, has been part and parcel of my ministry.

In a sense, the EHC helped to launch my writing ministry. From hindsight, my undergraduate days probably gave inkling to that possibility. I was told by my project supervisor that as soon as the external examiner, who had been given copies of the dissertations of the graduating students in the Department of Agriculture arrived, he was asking, “Who is Ojewale? I can’t wait to meet him,” and commending greatly on my writing style and logical presentation. My supervisor said he, likewise, had been impressed but was cautious if I could defend my work in person before the external examiner at the same level at which my written work had portrayed me.

My first assignment as the EHC university and college ministry director was to edit a little book titled, “The Reality of Life,” for use in Nigeria. It’s the copy of the same booklet being used by another Every Home for Christ ministry in an African country. All I had to do was change Nairobi to Lagos and Kenya to Nigeria. I said to myself, “You don’t need someone with a master’s degree in animal science to do that; any high school graduate would do that successfully.” Nevertheless, it’s an excellent and scholarly material to reach the academia. I read the book thoroughly and wrote an edition under the same title, “The Reality of Life” using as much content as possible from the book. My boss, the Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo, was specific that the blurb had my name, academic degrees and the universities that awarded the diplomas. When the book was printed it was so well-spoken of, in today’s language, with many rave reviews. I made sure my alma maters were among the

first during the distribution and I also ensured that copies were placed in the pigeonholes (or mailboxes) of lecturers and staff of the faculty of agriculture/department of animal science. Even though it was unrelated to agriculture or animal science, which I had studied, my former professors in the two universities I had studied were impressed and happy to see and read the work of one of their products. That was 1984.

I began to question myself: What if I had not been given the copy of the book from Kenya but was employed to facilitate the same ministry and was told to write one for use in Nigerian universities, what would I have written? With that challenge, I started reflecting on my university days and campus outreach ministries, viewing college ministries from different perspectives. My focus was on how best to communicate the gospel truth to adults with college-level education, disinterested intellectuals (and pervasive pseudointellectuals) in such a way that might gain their respect, or at least help remove the stigma that unscientific and less intelligent persons resort to and find solace in religion. By 1986, I had penned a series of thought-provoking writings that became chapters of a book I titled, “Pathway to Peace,” and, reflecting on the divers nature of the problems people across the nation were going through from their letters in the mail to EHC office, I published a book titled, “Overcoming Life’s Crises,” and so on. The EHC encouraged me to continue writing and soon began to use some of my published works in other aspect of the EHC ministry.

Gbenga Ewejobi: EHC Hookup

How did I learn about the EHC? That’s a good question. Gbenga, an all-weather friend, was my hookup. After my master’s degree in animal science, I was working as the agricultural project director for Toludun Farms, an animal and arable farming enterprise owned by a Christian businessman in Ibadan. Yet, I was praying for the direction of my life, especially in ministry. The late Rev. Gbenja Ewejobi, of blessed memory, my bosom friend, confidant and partner in ministry on many levels from our university days was on the board of a committee with Rev. (Dr.) Orebayo, the EHC director and the commit-

tee was holding a series of meetings. Rev. Orebayo mentioned to Gbenga that the EHC was looking to hire a university graduate and mature Christian to start the EHC university and college ministry. Gbenga said he knew the right person for the job. He blew my trumpet like no one else could. He trumped all I did, how I was involved various ministries, the Christian leadership roles I played in the university, and after graduation during my National Youth Service Corps⁴³ (NYSC). From then on the Rev. Bisi kept urging Gbenga to go and bring this man, this friend, Michael.

Gbenga wasn't sure of where I was living at that time in Ibadan, but he knew I would be in church on a Sunday morning. He could guess one or two churches I might be in on Sunday in Ibadan and even if he was in the wrong church, he was sure that someone in those churches would happen to know me and be able to direct him to where I was. Mind you, this was before the era of cell phones. His first hunch was right; he went to Oritamefa Baptist Church, but I was not in church that day. We just received thousands of day-old chicks on the farm that morning. We had a competent farm manager and farm hands to take care of them but for moral support I also chose to be on site. Virtually all employees on the farm were Christians. We kept a skeletal staff on Sundays, just to feed and water the chickens, collect and crate the eggs. We did not open for business or sales. Gbenga came to meet me on the farm and told me of the EHC. I wasn't sure if it was the answer to my prayers, especially, because it would take me to Lagos, and I wasn't sure if I was ready to live in metropolitan Lagos. I must have joked many years earlier that nothing would ever take me to work or live in that ever-changing, crazy traffic, hectic Lagos. If Gbenga had to come all the way from Lagos to Ibadan, about 120 kilometers drive for this, the least I could do was to investigate. Gbenga was going back to Lagos the same day. The EHC need was urgent. Gbenga would drive me to Lagos to meet with the Rev. Bisi and have a chat.

Up until that time I had been heavily involved in evangelistic outreaches

43. The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) is a program set up by the Nigerian government to involve Nigerian graduates in nation building and the development of the country. There is no military conscription in Nigeria, but since 1973 graduates of universities and later polytechnics have been required to take part in the National Youth Service Corps program for one year.

with the acclaimed Oritamefa Gospel Group, especially through its drama and singing groups. I was a guitarist and there was hardly any weekend that we didn't have a ministration invitation to minister through drama and music in a church, college, or evangelistic outreach within and outside Ibadan. Yet, I had always wondered about our follow up methods.

During one Christmas/End of the Year event the master of ceremonies had asked all who gave their lives to Christ through the Gospel Group ministry that year to indicate so. Some hands went up, but I bled inside, because I had expected more hands. I knew we should rejoice—and we did—even if it was just one soul that was reached. Yet, I considered the inconveniences and sacrifices we made for one whole year and they didn't seem to add up to the result, from my point of view. It felt as if something was missing. It was an eye-opener and I wondered within myself if that was all we had to show for fifty-two weekends of no weekend to myself but on the roads for one ministration or the other, that is, not counting weekends with multiple evangelistic events. We knew the converts in attendance were representative, not the total we reached. Despite this, I still couldn't get it out of my mind how many man-hours in total that would be when we put together the hours of other brothers and sisters in the group to justify the number of converts present. That's why I was sold when Rev. Bisi elaborated on the four lessons of Bible correspondence course as the follow up method of EHC. It was like I found the missing piece I had been looking for.

The Written Word

From time immemorial, literature has been used for good and bad. Novelist and playwright Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839 penned, "The pen is mightier than the sword"; implying that the power of writing is long lasting while the power of the sword is short-lived. Karl Marx had once said, "Give me twenty-six lead soldiers and I will conquer the world." By this Marx was referring to the twenty-six letters of the alphabet cast in lead that were used to set type on a printing press to print literature.

Even God was (and probably is still) in the writing business. We read,

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write this for a memorial in the book and recount it in the hearing of Joshua...’” Again, “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write these words, for according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel,’” (Exo. 17:14; 34:27). “And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord,” (Exo. 24:4a). Not to mention that the Almighty, God-self, wrote or chiseled the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Come up to Me on the mountain and be there; and I will give you tablets of stone, and the law and commandments which I have written, that you may teach them’ ... And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Cut two tablets of stone like the first ones, and I will write on these tablets the words that were on the first tablets which you broke,’” (Exo. 24:12; 34:1; emphasis mine).

Exasperated, Governor Pilate slammed the door on the requests of the Jewish religious leaders, declaring flatly, “What I have written, I have written,” (Jn. 19:22). This, to me, echoes Jesus’ appeal to the finality and authority of the written Word when He faced Satan’s temptations and boldly and resolutely declared, thrice, “IT IS WRITTEN...” (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). Sure enough, the Word accomplished the purpose for which it was sent (Isaiah 55:11). For, we read, “Then the devil left Him,” (v. 11a), apparently vanquished by the word.

Olawanle was not into writing. She worked with figures, numbers, charts and graphs. She was an economist, chartered accountant, and certified banker. Her life, and our lives together, is a rich story. But she was a private, reticent person. While she was alive, besides pleasantries, her name was off-limits in my sermons and writings. Thus far, out of respect, I have not said or written, and I will not say or write, anything about her or about our union that’s not already public knowledge in her lifetime. She was an amazing, loving, loyal, intelligent, and caring person. The word, integrity, found its best definition in her. She had a good head on her shoulders. She epitomized the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31. I miss her.

As a counselor, I am not comfortable when people, sometimes in a resigned tone of voice, say, “That’s all I know,” as if their lives could be defined by that one thing—good or bad. I feel like grabbing them by the shoulders, shaking

them up and yelling at the top of my voice, “No! You are bigger than that. That’s not all that you are; you are more than that.” However, truth be told, though I sincerely believe I am multitalented, when I thought how best to honor the life and memory of my late wife, Olawanle, I feel like writing is all I know; it’s all I do. It’s all I’ve been doing for over 40 years. Writing is the way I process my thoughts and it’s the way I focus (or refocus) my thinking. After the grieving process and my initial natural emotional response waned in the first year after her passing, I defaulted to “all I know, all I do”: writing. “Why Do Babies Die?” Chapter 10 of Book 1, is the longest chapter in this two-volume book and it is my first work after her death. Somehow, I want to believe that we—Olawanle and I—co-authored that chapter.

Back to Basics Ministry has two connotations for me. On one hand, it means going back to the basics, back to one-on-one discipleship, back to emphasizing the rudiments of our faith. On the other hand it means getting back to those things and practices I have known and grown up with, such as, emphasis on prayers, church-oriented evangelism, literature, community-based and outreach-focused ministries. If I can say so, even at the risk of nostalgia, back to basics for me is a return—if only in my mind—to the FFF (food, fun and fellowship) spontaneous love feasts of the SCM, Unife. Besides, I have always understood my life, calling and ministry—even pastoral ministry, through the lens of SCM, AJC and EHC. Where or who would I be without their input? Their fingerprints are all over me, and over all I do in ministry today.

The Chapel of Christ Our Light (CCOL), University of Lagos, Akoka

Although this section is titled the Chapel of Christ Our Light (CCOL), I never intended to write or say anything about my time as chaplain in the Chapel of Christ Our Light for the same reason—my guess—that David, the Psalmist of Israel, did not write any psalm to celebrate his victory over Goliath. David wrote many psalms and the superscriptions or introductory notes on many of his psalms usually indicated the occasion that inspired the

writing. Still, David had enough sense to know that slaying the Goliath was not his accomplishment; he was only a tool used by God. Yahweh wanted to vindicate His name, which Goliath had arrogantly smeared, and God found a daring, non-macho, non-machismo teenager who had never been drafted nor recruited for military service to do the job. As he ran towards Goliath, swinging his shepherd's sling and a stone—his only weapon, the fate of his country and the credibility of Yahweh hanged on the inexperienced shepherd who was risking it all for his God and his nation.

How could a seasoned and experienced warrior of the giant stature of Goliath, fully armed and heavily protected from head to toe—except an opening in his armor to enable him to see his opponent—be defeated by a lone stone striking him in the one and only right spot? It had to be God. As he prepared to take on Goliath, David had confidently declared for all to hear, “All this assembly shall know that the Lord does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's,” (1 Sam. 17:47). David never took credit for it. David wrote many psalms about his failures, deliverances, and some victories over his enemies, but slaying Goliath? That was on a different Richter scale of a magnitude that was out of this world. To start with, it had to be God, that I became the first fulltime chaplain of the University of Lagos Chapel of Christ Our Light. Everyone in the chapel committee or member of the chapel in the 90s knew this to be true. I pen this section, not so much about the chapel—which was a big and important chapter in my life, but in honor of a friend—Kenny Saba (later Mrs. Kenny Ayenibiowo).

The Recruiters for Appointment as Chaplain

The Reverend (Prof. also Mrs.) Kenny Ayenibiowo, of blessed memory, (formerly Miss Kenny Saba), and another brother, Brother Tunde (please permit me to keep the last name of this pastor undisclosed), who was also a member of the chapel committee of the Protestant Chapel of Christ Our Light, came to meet with me in my office at Every Home for Christ offices. They had approached me, because the chapel was seeking to call a full-time chaplain and they had been given the assignment of recruiters. Prior to that time the

chapel was using the services of volunteer chaplains or ministers from various denominations to lead its worship services. The small core membership of the chapel was largely Anglican (or Episcopalian) and the most consistent volunteer chaplain had been an Anglican priest, a Canon in the Anglican Communion. Thus, the format of the worship was largely Anglican. Any Christian student or staff that was committed to a Protestant, non-Anglican type of service was going outside the campus for worship services. Brother Tunde and sister Kenny felt the direction of the chapel might be all-out Anglican if an Anglican priest became the first full time chaplain. Besides, the then Anglican Bishop of Lagos, was interested in having the chapel under his supervision—as was the case with the University of Lagos College of Medicine, Idi-Araba Chapel, which was fully Anglican and was headed by a renowned Anglican Canon/retired Professor. And this idea of having an Anglican priest was highly favored by the leadership of the chapel committee.

When I was invited to preach so the congregation could have the chance to see and hear me, you could almost count the membership on your fingertips. It was more of a staff affair, barely any student member. A staff member was the pianist and the setup crew was essentially the committee members. The chairman of the chapel committee, partly embarrassed for the scanty attendance, was kind enough to tell me it was a holiday season. However, he also said I shouldn't expect many more when the holiday was over. He mentioned that one of the reasons for seeking a chaplain was the desire to grow the congregation, and I should consider if I was ready for that as a job description. Sister Kenny Saba, the late Dr. Kenny Ayenibiowo, was the secretary of the chapel committee. She handed to me the format of services that the consistent Anglican volunteer chaplain had prepared. On the pamphlet I saw "Collect for Prayer" and I thought I had to collect something for prayer. I turned to sister Kenny and asked, with complete innocence and naivety, "Where do I collect this?" pointing to the "collect" portion. She laughed and explained that meant prayer in the Anglican liturgy. Bless her soul, and bless her memory, she was my "go to" person for many things during my chaplaincy.

Sister Kenny was spontaneous, adaptable, totally dedicated and committed to things of the Kingdom. The University of Lagos and the university chapel of Christ our Light was her base. When you were particular or brainstorming about any Christian ministry or direction of ministry, she could think on her feet and provide you with the help you need. In most cases, she functioned in ministry like the fifth tire in your car trunk during a flat; anywhere you have a burst, front, back, right or left, the fifth tire would fit in and carry you to your destination safely. In like manner, sister Kenny could step in and fill any shoes wherever the need was. She was a pillar in the chapel. Children and youth ministry were in her blood and many families and their children would never forget her. She oversaw children and youth ministry until she was called home.

The chapel was not financially able enough to pay what I was earning at Every Home for Christ and the committee offered me a lower salary. I gladly accepted it for two reasons: one, I wasn't interested in the position as something I would do for longer than two years. I just wanted to help settle the place and maybe, have that experience added to my resume. I was happy as the EHC Prayer School Director/University and College Ministry Director. Two, I would remain a fulltime staff of the EHC, doing all I was doing except probably limiting travels on Sundays and the EHC was still paying my full salary. In a sense, it was like having two fulltime jobs. As God would have it, no sooner than I settled in as chaplain the finances and membership began to grow exponentially that, in about three months or less, the chapel committee decided to upgrade my pay to what I was earning at the EHC. After two years, I asked the EHC to stop paying me a salary, but I kept on carrying the full load of responsibility. We also decided on no severance or send-off ceremonies, because I would always be on EHC staff or its board. I was chaplain of the COCOL until I relocated to the US in the fall of 1996.

Sister Kenny was working on her Ph.D. in the department of psychology at the time they came to me. Brother Tunde got an overseas job as soon as I became chaplain. He was off the scene. It was an arrangement made in heaven. Brother Tunde was one person—remember, he was one of the

recruiters—that I wouldn't want to offend or hurt. Nevertheless, he was too radical and too much in a hurry for changes, especially to erase quickly or override any Anglican influence and go all out Pentecostal or, at least, Pentecostal-type. During his student days, he had been an active member of the Sword of the Spirit Ministry (SOTSM), a Pentecostal ministry that's considered homegrown to Unilag campus. Although at this time the leadership and ministry headquarters of SOTSM had moved to Ibadan, another city, Brother Tunde was also still much an active member of SOTSM.

The Sword of the Spirit Ministry was founded by (now Bishop) Wale Oke during his student days. From the student days, the Sword of the Spirit Ministry had a monthly magazine/newsletter, which gave it publicity and visibility, and was holding evangelistic crusades in many cities in the country. It was started and grew from the student days of brother Wale Oke and Brother Tunde in the University of Lagos. Unilag ECU members and past Unilag Christian students were proud of their son, their alumnus, Wale Oke, and honored to be associated with the SOTSM. Here I was an alumnus of two great universities (the university of Ife and university of Ibadan) in the territory of another great university. I never wanted to be on opposing sides on anything with Brother Tunde on his turf and I didn't want the Unilag ECU members to ever consider the chaplain as “not one of their own.” His immediate relocation was a relief and an answer to an unvoiced prayer. It had to be a setup from above.

Destiny Set the Stage for “He Who Calls You Is Faithful, Who Will Also Do It”—1 Thess. 5:24.

Although, I didn't want to say anything about my chaplaincy, I can't resist this, especially having been so elaborate on SOTSM. An evangelistic crusade had been planned to reach the students before I officially preached my first sermon as chaplain. Guess who had been invited as guest speaker. You guessed right: Who else but Evangelist Francis Wale Oke. Brother Tunde had been instrumental and the go-between in the process. The chapel was packed full by students who would normally not attend any chapel service. The Unilag

ECU members were all there, waiting to hear from one of their own. Evangelist Francis Wale Oke had been advertised as preacher and many Christians from the city, especially Unilag alumni, were present to hear him. Evangelist Wale Oke and his team were based in Ibadan. This was before the era of cell phones. We kept praying, singing and waiting but no Evangelist Wale Oke showed up. Minutes ran into hours, no Evangelist Wale Oke. Some said it was his style to arrive just in time for him to go to the platform to preach but waiting much longer was becoming embarrassing.

The chapel committee started putting heads together to consider whether to dismiss the crowd or look for a quick substitute preacher. Some considered it would be unfair to ask me to jump in and preach at the shortest notice—what if I flunked? How would that present me to the campus? Other members of the committee asked, who else? Wouldn't that be like a vote of no confidence in me to look somewhere else when the chapel had already called a chaplain, who also was in attendance? I was cautiously asked to consider if I could step in, at such a short notice, and if I couldn't, it would be understandable. I did. No, we did! Jesus and I did!

It was as if the stage had been set for me. I took my text from the picture of Jesus and the two thieves crucified with Him, which was the painting on the large banner that was hanging behind the pulpit. My text was Luke 23:39-43, the very scene the painting on the banner depicted and displayed graphically. I preached a simple evangelistic sermon I had once preached on a crusade ground (in Ile-Ife during a Unife SCM city crusade) and gave an altar call. By some strange coincidence, and by the grace of God, what Wale Oke had been to Unilag ECU, I also had been in some smaller measure on the platform of Unife SCM. Again, and again the mantle had fallen on me to preach on citywide crusade grounds during my student days as well as during my National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) year.

Three Crosses; Three Deaths; Three Eternal Destinies

Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." But the other, answering, rebuked him,

saying, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” And Jesus said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:39-43)

I stood under the large banner as if I had asked the organizers to prepare it for me and declared that it displayed the whole gospel message. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have everlasting life. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved (John 3:16, 17). Three men hanged on three crosses; the three died. It is appointed for man once to die, and after this the judgment (Hebrews 9:27). There are three different deaths represented in this picture. The first death, this man,” I pointed to the thief on Jesus’ left, “died in his sin; he faced afterlife in his sin, in an unforgiven state because, though he had the chance to repent, he did not—Numbers 27:3; 32:23. He could have been saved, but he was lost. The soul that sins shall die, the Scriptures declare—Ezekiel 3:18-20; 18:24. And he who does not believe is condemned already—John 3:18, 36. The second death, this man,” I pointed to the thief on the right of Jesus, “who had asked to be remembered, died unto sin; he died forgiven—Romans 6:10, 11. It didn’t matter that he was wicked and paying for his life of crime; it didn’t matter that he was not baptized or joined a church. What mattered was that he repented and turned to Christ. For we are not saved by works but by grace—Ephesians 2:8-10. He reached out to grace, to Jesus, and Jesus was equally available to his friend and partner in crime. The third death,” I pointed to Jesus, “Jesus died for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous. Jesus was God’s provision and solution to the sin problem. Christ died for our sins the Scriptures declare—1 Corinthians 15:3-5; Romans 5:6-8. It’s either you pay for your sin-debt and die for your sins or accept the Substitute, the Righteous One, who had chosen to pay for your sin-debt and died in your place, so you could be free.

“We also see three types of judgment in the picture. This man, the thief on

the left of Jesus, died without an advocate and would have to pay the penalty for his sin; and the wages of sin is death, eternal death—Romans 6:23. He would be judged for his sins. The thief on the right, though he had shared the same credentials with his partner, had a different fate. He had passed from death to life because he put his faith in Christ—John 5:24; 1 John 3:14. He would no longer speak for himself; he now had an Advocate—1 John 2:1, 2. He trusted in God who justifies the ungodly—Romans 4:5, and rather than being judged and condemned was declared justified by faith—Romans 5:1. He would no longer face judgment because Someone else—Jesus—had been judged and Jesus had paid for his sins. His account was stamped: paid in full. The Man in the middle, Jesus, is the Mediator between God and humanity—1 Timothy 2:5. God sent His Son, Jesus, to pay for our sins. The prophet said all we like sheep have gone astray but God has laid upon Jesus our sins—Isaiah 53:4-6; 2 Corinthians 5:21. Jesus became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God; Jesus, who knew no sin, was sentenced and judged for our sins. What changed the fate of the thief on the right? He prayed; he repented; he called on Jesus. What would determine or change anyone's eternal destiny? Same things. Pray. Repent. Call on Jesus. As you know, the story did not end with crosses and the grave because Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. We serve a risen and living Lord who wants to come into your life and forgive you, write your name in the Book of Life, and live in your heart and life by His Holy Spirit." If I ever had a "go to" evangelistic sermon, this would be it.

It was God's way of introducing me to the campus. The ECU members who would never have considered listening to a chaplain or joining the chapel saw the kind of spiritual atmosphere they had been praying for. With the strange combination of the banner, my text, and the message the evening went so smoothly and seamlessly that some chapel committee members couldn't believe it hadn't been preplanned for me. As soon as we closed and dismissed, guess who had just arrived from Ibadan and was standing in the parking lot with his team. You guessed right: Evangelist Francis Wale Oke and SOTSM team.

Some ECU alumni and students gathered around his car. One alumnus asked him why they came so late. He explained it was heavy traffic. The SOTSM office in Ibadan was by the expressway tollgate, and that guaranteed easy escape from the town. The alumnus was not satisfied and asked for the time the team left Ibadan for a one-hour trip to Lagos for them to have arrived so late for the meeting. The Evangelist Wale Oke evaded giving the time but said he had a meeting, which lasted longer than the scheduled time. The disappointed alumnus wasn't happy with the answer and kept pressing to know the exact time the team set out. At that time, another alumnus grabbed my hand and pulled me away from the little crowd around the car. He told me, "Pastor, we thank God for the message and for your ministration tonight. This is my first time of meeting you and hearing you preach. It doesn't matter when they left Ibadan. This was not Evangelist Wale Oke's night; this was your night. We thank God for bringing you to Unilag." The rest is history, or God's story, I should say.

Recognizable Faces Amongst the Great Cloud of Witnesses—Heb. 12:1

In my Christian journey, I have been helped and propped by countless fellow Christians and ministers at different times—and I am eternally grateful to everyone, but only two persons I truly call my mentors. They are Brother Bola Sanni of AJC and Reverend Bisi Orebayo of EHC. I worked with them, for them and under them. They had the vision; I bought into their vision. The maxim, or aphorism, "know thyself" speaks volumes, whichever way anyone chooses to understand it. On a personal level, I'm not a detail person and I'm more reflective than spontaneous. That's one reason why I like playing the second fiddle. Working under these two made me more appreciative of the blessings of playing the second fiddle. When you are playing the second fiddle, if things turn out right, you share and bask in the glory, but if things don't turn out right, you don't take the blame because you aren't the boss. With them, it was all about humble service and honor to Christ, a good name and legacy, nothing scandalous or disgraceful. You can stretch, thrive,

Teach Them

and blossom while playing the second fiddle in a nurturing environment and yet be free of the full weight of management on your shoulders. Being older than me in age and Christian maturity, they did not have to, but we mutually served one another even as we served Christ together. They trusted me; they had my best interest at heart; they saw things in me that I couldn't see in myself. They gave me assignments, mentioned my name, and recommended me in high places and thrust me into leadership positions of responsibilities too advanced for my age, expertise and experience because they believed I could rise to the occasion. This is for you, my two brothers, friends, and mentors on the balcony of heaven—you have the last word: THANKS.

Appendix 1

Introducing *Auntie 'Wanle Memorial Foundation/ Back to Basics Ministry*

Back To Basics Ministry/Auntie 'Wanle Memorial Foundation:

Primarily to Serve University & College Students Everywhere, Beginning with OAU-IFE and UNILAG Students in Nigeria

I have been blessed with exceptional women who have sacrificed much and sown bountifully and selflessly into my life, beginning with my mother, Mama Omoboade Asande Ojewale, my late wife, Olawanle Titilayo Ojewale, who died of endometrial cancer on March 17, 2014, and my present wife, Praise Onyeka Ojewale.



Olawanle and I were wedded on April 5, 1986.

Olawanle and I first met in the mid-70s as students of the University of Ife (now, Obafemi Awolowo University; Unife, for short). She studied economics; I studied agriculture. We were both born-again Christians from different high schools and we joined the Student Christian Movement (SCM) of the institution. We were especially in proximity as members of the SCM during fellowship meetings, Bible studies, prayer meetings and outreach

programs where we served together as brother and sister in Christ, but marriage never came into our discussions until we both graduated. After graduation, and

for my National Youth Service Corps in 1979-1980, I was the national traveling secretary for the SCM of Nigeria, and during that time I visited more than 20 colleges and universities in Nigeria. After our marriage in April 1986, we both made Lagos our home. I was working with Every Home for Christ (EHC), pioneering, and directing its Universities & Colleges (Literature) Ministry and the Prayer School Ministry. I traveled extensively and visited or mailed cartons of literature to more than 40 colleges and universities in Nigeria.

In God's providence, I became the first full-time Protestant chaplain of the Chapel of Christ Our Light of the University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos, in 1990. That word, "providence" (or Divine Providence) in the last sentence sums up the process, and it is weightier than I can unpack or even attempt to unravel. True to her nickname, "Ms. Independent," Olawanle was not one who readily aligned herself with the next new thing or new sermon series that her self-professed Christian strategist, visionary-dreamer-husband came up with (and who would blame her with my track record?), but when she did eventually sign on, she was the one person whose feedback I craved, cherished and could not ignore.

By and large, our lives and ministries revolved around the youth, students, university campuses, students' ministry, and equipping the next generation. We strove not only to be able to pass the baton of faith to those coming after us but much more to be said that we bequeathed a legacy of authentic *faith of our fathers* that's substantive in content and character. It is for this reason that the circulation of this not-for-sale two-volume book, *Teach Them*, donations to Back to Basics Ministry, the rent from Olawanle Memorial House in Isolo, Lagos, and other joint assets will go into the coffers of Auntie 'Wanle Memorial Foundation to be used for distributing copies of the two-volume book to students in both Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile-Ife, and University of Lagos, (Unilag), Akoka, Lagos. These two institutions helped to shape our worldviews, and the relationships we forged therein provided stability and support system for us. Olawanle Memorial House at No. 12, Samuel Okpara Street, Ilamose Estate, Oke-Afa, Isolo, LAGOS, Nigeria, will also serve as the official headquarters of Auntie 'Wanle Memorial Foundation/Back to Basics Ministry.

Olawanle Was Here

I was a science teacher in middle schools in Brooklyn, New York City, back in the day when chalk and blackboard were in use, which was before the era of smart boards. I sometimes traveled from class to class to teach, especially when other teachers and classes were using the science rooms. Most teachers would have come across this kind of graphic art: you got to a new class and by the corner of the chalkboard you'd find the decorated scribble: **“Reggie was here,”** or **“Clara was here.”** It was usually a few students in the whole school who had this habit, and you would find their fingerprints on the blackboards of every class where they'd been. Reggie and Clara were usually some characters in the school. I always erased the scribble with a smile, because I didn't think it was ordinary graffiti; I thought I understood what the kids were saying or trying to convey. They were saying, “I'm not invisible; see me, notice me for who I am.” They were saying or trying to say to all and sundry that they were important; that their lives mattered, that they'd left their footprints behind, that they had indeed been here. Reggie and Clara were not phantoms they were real and had been here.

What Reggie and Clara were doing on the chalkboard is what every one of us craved for. It is a search for the meaning of our lives. Do we matter? Do we count in the scheme of things? Have we made any significant impact? Would our footprints be noticeable in the sands of time? Have we sung our song? Did we dance our dance? Did we fully play our part before exiting the stage of life? Would anyone miss us when we are dead and gone? Would there be any writing on some non-erasable chalkboard, some painting or photograph, or some engravings, or something chiseled on the curbs or pavement that read: “He was here; Reggie was here.” After he learned of the passing of my late wife, Olawanle, a fellow chaplain shared a Jewish saying with me. He said the Jews say, “Only those who are truly dead are those who've been forgotten.” Olawanle fully played her part in life, and especially, in my life. I am proof positive, and this work is, that OLAWANLE WAS HERE! OLAWANLE IS STILL HERE. She's alive in the hearts and memories of family and friends.

By the same token:

Gideonite Oladele Otaniyi was here

Pa. (Deacon) Paul Omehen Uwaya was here

The Reverend (Prof./Mrs.) Kenny Ayenibiowo was here

The Reverend Gbenga Ewejobi was here

The Reverend Dele Ijagbulu was here

Bishop Titus Gbenga David was here

The Reverend (Dr.) Bisi Orebayo was here

Evangelist (Reverend) Bola Sanni was here

THEY ARE STILL HERE, in the hearts and memories of families and friends.

A Book of Remembrance

In a sense, this is my book of remembrance. Even God has a book of remembrance (Malachi 3:16).

The Old Testament prophet Malachi mentioned “the book of remembrance.” A book of remembrance, among other things, will likely provide a simple record of and memorial to the deceased, the name of the deceased and a suitable epitaph. Isn’t it interesting that God would have such a book?

In four future generations (or one hundred years) from now everyone who knows or remembers them (and me, too) would have died—and with that all their memories will fade away. At that time, I pray that this work, *Teach Them*, dedicated in their honor, and this ministry of book distribution would continue in one form or another and thus outlive and outlast us, and our remembrances.

We read in Malachi 3:16—

“Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another. And the Lord listened and heard them; so a BOOK OF REMEMBRANCE was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name,” (emphasis mine).

This will not be a true book of remembrance without giving you the opportunity to recall, remember and revisit family members and friends who

had been an integral part of your life and with whom you had shared life and joint stories but had departed to glory. When they departed that part of your life in relationship with them was gone; yet, even though they are no more with you a part of them is still with you, if not physically, emotionally and in your subconscious self. Their story was not complete without your part, and your story is incomplete without their part. Together you had woven an embroidered, multicolored tapestry of (borrowing from a book title) “The Story of Us, The Story of God.” In the box below, insert the name or names of some individuals you will like to remember, who are no longer here, because they have gone to life beyond. Remember the Yiddish saying I cited earlier, “Only those who are truly dead are those who’ve been forgotten.”

Today, I thankfully and fondly remember:

1. _____
was here, and is still here in one form or another
2. _____
was here, and is still here in one form or another
3. _____
was here, and is still here in one form or another
4. _____
was here, and is still here in one form or another
5. _____
was here, and is still here in one form or another

¹³ But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those

who sleep in Jesus.

¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

“Love is stronger than death even though it can’t stop death from happening, but no matter how hard death tries it can’t separate people from love. It can’t take away our memories either. In the end, life is stronger than death.”

Unknown

Appendix 2

The Mission of *Back to Basics Ministry* in a Nutshell

Primarily, *Back to Basics Ministry* is a literature saturation organization that seeks to work with, through and in partnership with the local churches and university/college chapels.

Teach Them Books 1 and 2 are our primary ministry tools. With these, we seek to

1. Enhance the Youth, Discipleship, Small Groups, and other ministries of the local church/chapel through our resource materials, books 1 and 2, and seek the support of the local church for free distribution of these books outside the four walls of the church/chapel.
2. Encourage, build, and equip students in colleges and universities, our future leaders, through free distribution of books 1 and 2.
3. Cheerleaders' Program: Adopt-a-High School; to "Catch Them Young" we seek to distribute book 1 to high school graduating students in targeted communities.
4. Cheerleaders' Program: Adopt-a-Prison; to project hope and offer the gospel of transformation through the new life Christ offers to inmates about to return to society through distribution of book 2 in prisons.
5. Connect, Empower, and Support the ministry of missionaries by sending free copies of book 1 and book 2 to help their follow up of new converts and emerging study groups.

Minimum Goal in OAU and Unilag, Nigeria

We hope to strategically, freely distribute Books 1 and 2 to whosoever, in these two institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. As a minimum starting point and yearly goal, by whatever process or manner those in charge deem fit, we hope to freely distribute,

- 1000 copies of Teach Them, Book 1 to First Year students in both OAU and Unilag in September/October or during the orientation for new students or any suitable time during the first semester, (500 copies in each institution) and
- 1000 copies of Teach Them, Book 2 to graduating students in both OAU and Unilag in March/May or any appropriate time during the second semester, (500 copies in each institution).
- Logistically, we may supply 500 copies of each book and leave the timing and method of distribution of the books to the discretion of our liaisons in the institutions. Depending on the judgment of those on ground in the institutions, the two books may be distributed any time and any way they deem best.

Building Relationship with the Local Churches and University Chapels as Partners

Basically, the two-volume publication, Teach Them, is a tool for youth ministry and a resource for one-on-one discipleship. We believe they will enhance the ministry of the local church and college chapel.

The books will neither be sold nor distributed freely in local churches, university/college chapels, or to the public but will be offered as a ministry tool and Christian discipleship resource materials to local churches and college chapels as well as a means to raise funds for free distribution of the books to students in colleges/universities. We will give a complimentary copy of each book to the pastor or chaplain for vetting. We will then ask the pastor or chaplain for a **Church Liaison**, to relieve the pastor of further burden.

The Local Church Liaison

The Local Church Liaison could be a deacon or minister, suggested and recommended by the pastor. The local church liaison will be responsible for creating awareness and displaying the books for at least four Sundays to the local church members—unless the pastor asks for time extension. He/she will offer the books to church members for a stated minimum gift in the following terms:

- Get a book with a minimum donation/gift of \$10.00 or \$XX. (\$XX is the amount suggested by the church/pastor/chaplain).

After about four weeks of creating awareness and exposing the books to the local church, the offerings/donations collected and the remaining books will be collected from the liaison, unless the church asks for extension beyond four weeks. In addition to receipts from the book display we will ask for donations from the church. All donations/gifts will go towards funding the books for free distribution to students in colleges/universities.

Field Staff & Approved Volunteers

The **field staff** and **volunteers** help to initiate relationship with local churches. They visit **pastors** and churches to intimate them with the books as tools for ministry, create awareness for the books and how they could be of use in the local church setting, and also explain the program of free book distribution to students in colleges and universities.

Character Education Books, *creating a future of civility, virtue and decency.*

When the *Teach Them* publications are on display beyond four weeks in a local church, the character education books by Dr. M. O. Ojewale may be displayed alongside and introduced to parents and teachers in the congregation. The titles include, *Moonlight Stories from West Africa*, *Let's Talk About That!*, *Teens of Character*, etc. They are books for sale at discounted prices; and the proceeds are ploughed back into the ministry.

Teach Them

Back to Basics Ministry is committed to resourcing our schools and teachers with materials and resources to help create a future of civility, decency, and virtues without which human society degenerates into a jungle. The books are designed as supplemental or additional resources for English Language teachers (ELA), Social Studies and science teachers. Teachers are free to make copies of any part of the books for their students.

Promotional T-Shirt & Newsletter

For publicity and to create awareness in a local church, volunteers and liaisons may be supplied and wear a T-shirt or Polo shirt with the words, TEACH THEM—Matt. 28:20; 2 Tim. 2:2 in front and BACK TO BASICS MINISTRY in the back. We will update partner churches through a monthly/periodic newsletter.

Seasonal Offers

Periodically, during Easter or Christmas *Back to Basics Ministry* will utilize media in a targeted community to offer free copies of our books. This can be in form of fliers, billboards, posters, or even TV/radio ad. Examples as in the textboxes:

Tired? Blank? Puzzled?

Are you at your wit's end? Does it seem like you've run out of options? Feeling trapped, chained down and locked up in your mind and body? Do you really want to be free from the habits, relationships and lifestyle that have held you captive, against which you are powerless?

WE CAN HELP, AND WE LOVE TO BE OF HELP

Send for a free copy of our book: *Pathway to True Freedom & Echoes of Hope from a Prison Chaplain's Prison Ministry*

Visit our website: www.backtobasicsministry.org for a free copy

Scared? Angry? Resigned?

Are you confused and unsettled? Are you full of questions and questioning and getting little or no answers? Agitated with doubts and questions about life, purpose, family, God, love, society, afterlife, etc.

WE CAN HELP, AND WE LOVE TO BE OF HELP

Send for a free copy of our book: *Biblical Counsels on Thorny Questions for Youth & Truth Seekers*

Visit our website: www.backtobasicsministry.org for a free copy

Appendix 3—Free Resources Available on Our Website

Free Resources, e-books, and audio books available on our website—www.BackToBasicsMinistry.org

Christian Publications by the Reverend (Dr.) M. O. Ojewale

1. **God and Suffering**—*A Theology of Hope and Healing*, published 2002, 151 pages
2. **Blessed Are Your Tears**—*Making Sense of Pain and Suffering Through Community and Storytelling*, published 2001, 149 pages
3. **Emotional Wellness**—*A Biblical Recourse to Mental and Emotional Well-Being*, published 2004, 191 pages
4. **Even a Caged Bird Sings**—*Discover how you may “Rejoice in the Lord Always”*, published 2004, 96 pages

Christian Audio Books by the Reverend (Dr.) M. O. Ojewale

1. **Uncle Mike Answers Your Questions**—Read by a paid professional, 119,702 words, 21 chapters, 2014.
2. **Why Do Babies Die?** (an excerpt from Uncle Mike Answers Your Questions)—read by Deacon Harry Franklin of Concord Baptist Church of Christ, Brooklyn, NY, 31,653 words, 2015

Character Education Books, especially for public schools and concerned parents interested in promoting civility, decency, and virtues; non-religious, story-based, by Dr. M. O. Ojewale

1. **Success Motivation and Life Skills**—*Promoting Civility, Culture and*

Character among Teenagers, published 2008, 320 pages

2. **Moonlight Stories from West Africa**—*Teaching and Learning Social Skills and Life Lessons through Storytelling*, published 2008, 224 pages

Character Education Books, especially for public schools and concerned parents interested in promoting civility, decency, and virtues; non-religious, story-based; teacher-and-students friendly, workbook format, standard/letter paper size (A4 or 8.5” x 11”), downloadable and printable, by Dr. M. O. Ojewale

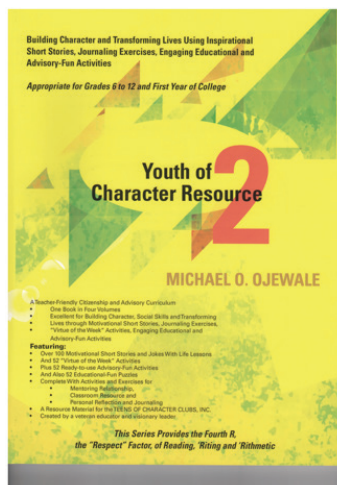
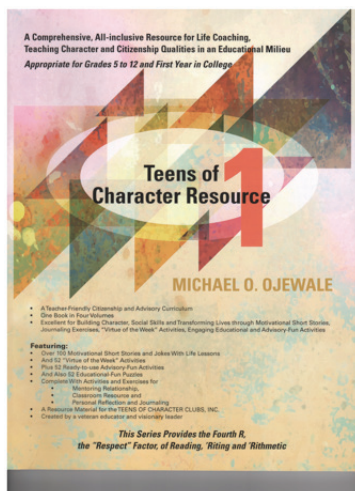
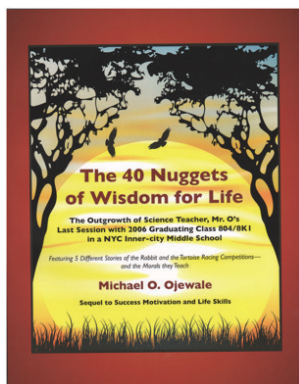
1. **Moonlight Stories from West Africa**—*Featuring Fifteen Tortoise Folktales*, workbook format; published 2012, 224 pages
2. **Let’s Talk About That**—*30 Talking Points for Teen Success* (2nd edition of *Success Motivation and Life’s Skills*)—workbook format, 2017, 208 pages.
3. **The Forty Nuggets of Wisdom for Life**, *Sequel to Success Motivation and Life Skills*, 2008, 166 pages
4. **The Forty Nuggets of Wisdom Virtues Exercise Workbook**, *Students’ Workbook and Journal*, 2017, 64 pages
5. **Teens of Character Resource Book 1**—*A Comprehensive, All-inclusive Resource for Life Coaching, Teaching Character and Citizenship Qualities in an Educational Milieu*, published 2013, 240 pages
6. **Youth of Character Resource**, (Teens of Character Book 2), published 2013, 208 pages
7. **Youth With Purpose**, (Teens of Character Book 3), available online as e-book only, 2013, 206 pages; downloadable and printable
8. **Youth With Impact**, (Teens of Character Book 4), available online as e-book only, 2013, 178 pages; downloadable and printable

On Religion and Politics—Free e-books

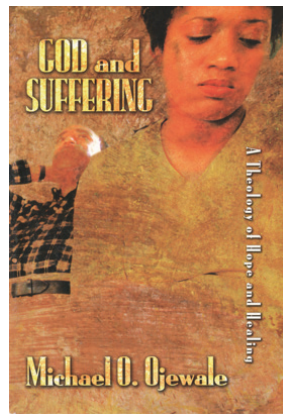
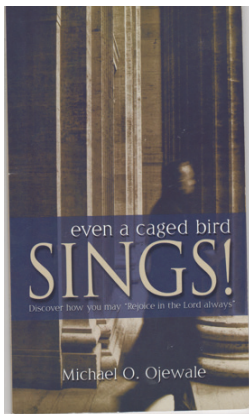
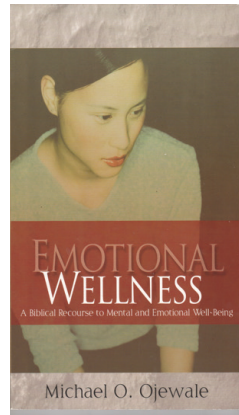
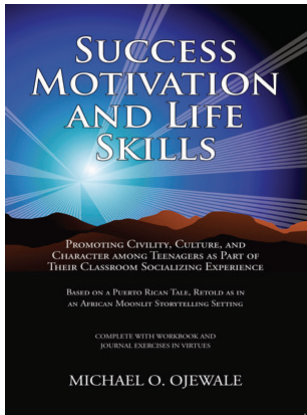
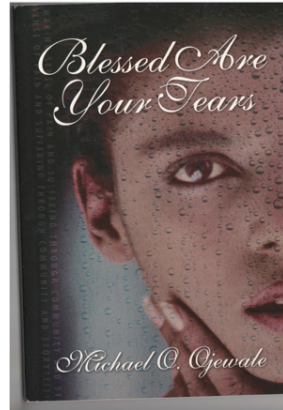
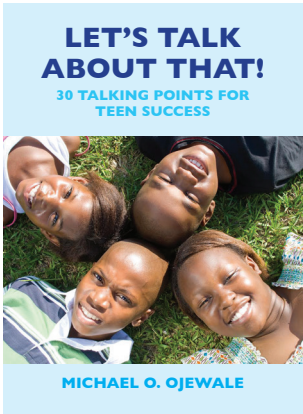
1. **Pulpits, Pews, & Political Parties in the US: Who is Using Who?** Dec. 2020, 24 pages

2. **Nigeria's 60 Tumultuous Years (1960-2020)**—Which Way Forward? Dec. 2020, 34 pages

SAMPLE FREE E-BOOKS, and many more, by Dr. Michael O. Ojewale, AVAILABLE ON OUR WEBSITE @ www.BackToBasicsMinistry.org



Appendix 3—Free Resources Available on Our Website



Modus Operandi

“Teach Them” is NOT FOR SALE. “Teach Them” is circulated in churches on the basis of “Get 1 book for a minimum donation of \$10.00 or \$XX.00”, where \$XX.00 is the amount suggested by the pastor.

Back to Basics Ministry is a Literature Ministry to, and in Partnership with, the Local Church; for Equipping and Encouraging the Youth of Today, the Leaders of Tomorrow, through Distribution of “Teach Them” Publication, Books 1 and 2 in Higher Education Institutions. Our goal is to be a local church and readership-supported literature ministry. We all agree our youths are worth any investment or sacrifice we make today for posterity.

Our appeal to pastors: We kindly ask you to:

1. Read, or browse through the books, or give them to an associate who can do so on your behalf, vet, and make recommendations regarding our proposals. We strive for mutuality and collaboration, where we are a blessing to the mission of your congregation, and you are a blessing to the vision of our ministry.
2. Suggest a trusted associate who will serve as **Church Liaison**, to reduce your workload. We will keep future communications and relationship-building with the liaison, who also will be responsible for displaying and promoting the books within your local church. See appendix 2 in the book for our modus operandi in a nutshell.
3. Since the books are not for sale, and knowing that we seek financial support from your church, we leave it to you to suggest a minimum donation from your members to obtain a copy. Alternatively, in concert with the church liaison, permit us to hold a “30-Minutes Youth Rally” in your church when we bless each youth in attendance with a free copy of *Teach Them* Book 1.

Modus Operandi

4. Come on board by (i) adopting a school, college, prison, or missionary outpost where your church can strategically distribute copies of *Teach Them* at printing cost, (ii) having special editions of *Teach Them* printed for your church/organization, with your church's/organization's info, news and reports inserted, (since we are in it together), and (iii) being the bridge that connects us to neighboring churches and pastors.

Postscript

This is for people I may have disappointed. If you had picked this book expecting to read the statistics of how many inmates were saved, converted or gave their lives to Christ and you didn't find any such record or testimony, then I'm happy I disappointed you. The reason being that Christ did not assign me the job of entering names into the Lamb's Book of Life. For that reason, I wouldn't know for certain whose names got into the record book, how many or when anybody's name got entered into the Lamb's Book of Life. Besides, you know, as I do, that not all who signify to receive Christ into their lives follow through with intentionality. To this effect, Jesus once quoted the prophet Isaiah, when He chided the pharisaic religious leaders, *"These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me,"* (Matt. 15:8).

Like many local churches in society, we hold communion service on the first Sunday of the month. After I introduced the koinonia love feast, which was about a year before the pandemic global lockdown, I moved the communion service to second Sunday and the after-service coffee/coffee cake meal sharing to first Sunday of the month. When services resumed in February of 2021, with respite from the corona virus after the yearlong lockdown, I soon noticed that the attendance was highest on koinonia first Sunday. It appeared that many on the call out were turning out for service on first Sunday for food and fellowship. To forestall enticing attendance with food, henceforward, I began to alternate communion service on either first or second Sunday while I made the koinonia any arbitrary Sunday, previously unannounced, in the month.

In addition to occasional volunteer preachers/guest preachers, I supplemented the Sunday services with DVDs of religious telecasts of prominent preachers, especially those who have heart and message for the "lost, last and least" of society. One reason for this is that I believe the inmates should listen to other voices from the pulpit in addition to their chaplain's. It's the kind of

practice I would adopt if I were pastor of a church in society; that is, share my pulpit with, and expose my congregation to other ministries and voices. A second reason is because I wanted to incorporate the use of technology, in whatever form, in the service. With all the dramatics and theatrics, I always got more than worth my investment on any recorded sermon on DVD. I could almost swear that some of the preachers whose DVDs I use took acting lessons in school. It's never a dull moment.

We hold baptismal services once, twice or three times in the year, if possible close/around Easter, Christmas or New Year, depending on how many and how often inmates indicated to be baptized. Still, you did not read the account of how many inmates attended baptismal classes and were later baptized. The reason is that, at any point in time, 80 percent, if not more, of members of the Choir/Praise Team were inmates who had been baptized in their local churches and were accomplished church muscicians/soloists and yet they now sit in jail for some crimes, more often than not a sex offense. If that many baptized church people have exchanged choir robes for prison gowns for some crimes they committed, who am I to tout any number of baptized inmates as any significant milestone?

This much I know, and this much I am happy to tell you: We hear echoes of hope from inside prison cells when Christ (and chaplains) are welcomed within prison walls. Jesus says, "*I AM the Light of the world,*" (Jn. 8:12c) and turning to His followers He says, "*You are the light of the world,*" (Matt. 5:14a). As a mere flicker of light changes the condition in a dark room in like manner the atmosphere is never the same when Christ, the Light of the world and a chaplain, His torch bearer, are welcomed in prison. Time and time again I've known inmates who were not raised in religious homes, had never been to church and never owned or read a Bible—even back on the streets. Through the influence of other inmates who are Christians in their dorms, the way these Christian inmates live in sharp contrast to other inmates in the dorm, their demeanor and the way they studied their Bibles, these unchurched inmates have become inquisitive and have signed up for Sunday services, and consequently, Bible studies and Kairos events.

I tip my hat to the Kairos volunteers—they are remarkable and outstanding, loving and nonjudgmental. They deserve the last word. They hold weekly singspiration prayer 'n share meetings with inmates, which includes breaking into small groups to reflect and discuss after a minitalk/bible lesson. In October of every year, about a 30-35-member-strong team of Kairos volunteers run the annual in-house four-day retreat program for 40-45 inmates. During the retreat, the volunteers lodge in the town in the evenings after a whole-day of sharing themselves and investing in the inmates. I'm always impressed by the array of people in the team. They include college professors and carpenters, church musicians and automobile mechanics, math teachers and plumbers, dads and sons, son-in-laws, brother-in-laws and father-in-laws, cancer survivors and retirees with titanium knee replacements beeping when they pass through metal detectors. The four-day retreat is very transformative for many inmates. In the course of two or three years I have known some previously unchurched inmates who have worn out their first Bibles and their new friends and mentors are Kairos volunteers and fellow Christian inmates who take Sunday services and Bible studies seriously. How many of such are we talking about? Is *one* a good number?

About the Author



Michael O. Ojewale, BS (Agric.), MS (Animal Science/Nutrition), MDiv, PhD (Biblical counseling), is an ordained clergyman, a seasoned educator, NYS certified biology/general science teacher, 7-12, board certified clinical chaplain (BCCC), and author of several books, especially Christian/theological and books and

curriculum for Character Education. He published his first work, *The Reality of Life*, in 1984 for the University and College Ministry of *Every Home For Christ* (Nigeria). He's taught at all levels and grades: elementary, middle and high schools (mostly inner city), and doctoral-level seminary students.

Dr. M. Ojewale's first passion is to affirm the "*image of God*" and dignity in every person, to see people come to know and experience the abundant life available in Christ, and to see them grow and mature in Christlikeness. His second passion is promoting *a future of character, civility, etiquettes and citizenship* as an integral part of classroom culture. He was the Protestant Chaplain of the University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos-Nigeria, before relocating to the US in fall of 1996. He lived in Brooklyn New York for 18 years where he taught in public schools and also served as an associate pastor (pastor for prayer) in Concord Baptist Church before relocating Upstate. He is currently a Protestant Chaplain in a State Correctional Facility, and a member of Loudonville Community Church, Albany, NY.