

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE POWER OF PRAYER IN PRISON

The most powerful tool that a Christian can use to minister in prison is prayer. Inmates, who have experienced the real power of prayer coming through the walls of a big penitentiary or prison cell, tell of many spiritual experiences that cannot be a simple matter of coincidence. Emotions may run high as Christian convicts relate their own personal encounters with God through prayer. They tell of actually feeling loved ones praying for them from outside the prison wall as they sit in their cells inside the prison. Few prisoners who have experienced this remarkable sensation will ever again doubt the tremendous power of prayer anywhere whether it is inside or outside the prison environment.

Our great and almighty God responds to human crisis situations and hears our prayers in a special way during times of distress or war or other physical and emotional crises such as a hospital stay. The author can remember his dad telling him as a young boy about the power of prayer on the mission field in Madagascar. My dad would relate the feeling of uplift and protection he had received from God when, through correspondence from his loved ones in America, he would find out by letter that a church group 12,000 miles away had been praying for him at a specific time. Fifty years later, I can testify to this experience personally as my wife would pray for me many miles away outside the prison. I would feel the prayers while I was locked up in my cell. I fully realized what was happening and I often “prayed back” a prayer of love and concern for her. I would also pray for her during the hours that she actually traveled more than 200 miles one way to the prison. She would confirm the feeling of God’s guiding hand as she proceeded to and from the prison.

Don’t ever underestimate the power of prayer to reach inside the toughest prison with the tightest security regulations and bring help and protection to the inmates. Your intercession will be a blessing to them and an exceptional source of spiritual strength. Prayer has prevented much violence and started revivals in many big prisons. It has been a major source of strength for Christian convicts in very difficult circumstances.

Prayer is an essential part of a Bible study or church service inside the prison wall. Inmates expect to pray and many of them will participate if you give them a chance. Bowing their heads and closing their eyes often gives them a special peace and temporarily removes them from their surroundings. Praying by themselves or mentally participating in prayer can work wonders in the personal life of Christian inmates. It is a way of acknowledging the peace and tranquility of the Holy Spirit and gives him the relief that he really needs from his current dilemma.

This humble and private conversation with god transcends the prison and brings him personal peace in this world of incarceration. Speaking to God is “freedom” and one way out of the prison. Prayer is “Private Stash,” as they say in prison. Private stash is a prison term for personal property that you are allowed by prison authorities to keep. Prayer is something that you can have and keep in prison. Prayer is the only answer to the incarceration that an inmate can totally rely on 24 hours a day.

Prayer is a must before you enter any prison to visit or conduct any kind of ministry. The author does not know of a single prison ministry anywhere in the United States (from Alaska to Florida) that does not have prayer before a prison visit. Prayer is a necessary part of the routine to enter any prison and provides the basis for the rest of the visit. Whether it is the county jail, maximum security penitentiary or half-way house, the prison visitor needs to pause outside and ask God to bless his efforts. Pray for guidance in all that you do and say. You must do this even if the visit is to one inmate alone or even if the visit is held in the regular visiting area and not in the chapel. Prayer is the most important thing that you will ever do as you bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ behind the walls of our nation’s prisons. Prayer is the only way you can reasonably expect to succeed. Prayer is the beginning and the end (the Alpha and the Omega) of every prison visit.

Leading an inmate to know and believe the Gospel of the Lord Jesus requires much prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit. Often the prison volunteer must guide the new Christian through repentance and a prayer of confession and assurance.

When you minister in prison you do the most important work that any Christian can ever do when you lead an inmate to a personal saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Remember the five scriptural steps to salvation. (Quotations from Scriptures below are from NIV.)

1. **ACNOWLEDGE:** “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). “God have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13).
2. **REPENT:** “Unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Acts 3:19).
3. **CONFESS:** “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).
4. **BELIEVE:** “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16).
5. **LIVE:** “So, then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:6-7).

As you explain the meaning of these passages, the Holy Spirit can work and create saving faith. Be sensitive to that working of the Spirit. Ask the inmate questions such as: Does he understand the meaning of the five steps and the passages. Does he believe them. Ask him if he is willing to confess his sins and ask forgiveness from God. If he confesses faith, the Holy Spirit has created it.

We must keep in mind that the inmate sometimes has a natural fear of “confessing” his crime publicly, especially if the court appeals process is still under way. We need to help the inmate understand that Jesus Christ died for all sins whether they be against God or the government or both. You can assure him that there is no need to single out his particular crime unless he wants to. All have sinned (Romans 3:23) and everyone needs forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Even the chaplain and the prison guards need forgiveness and salvation.

When the inmate is ready and wants to pray, you can help him find words to talk to God. The prayer does not create faith or lead him to faith. If he says he believes and wants to pray, the Holy Spirit has already brought him to faith even though it may be a very weak faith. The prayer can confess sin, acknowledge the faith that is there, and ask God to increase that faith and give help to live a changed life.

The prayer may include words like this:

Lord, Jesus, I believe that You died for all my sins. I am sorry for the wrongs I have done and ask Your forgiveness. Thank You for helping me to believe. I need You and want You to help me serve You and to manage my life from this day on. Amen.

As you leave this kind of sacred moment, remember that this inmate is like a newborn baby. He will need much attention and care and your continued prayers. Walk away with joy and praise to God but with the commitment to continue to help this inmate and to use the power of intercessory prayer to the honor and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.