

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE TRAUMA OF ARREST AND PROSECUTION

Very little has been written about the trauma or fear connected with arrest, prosecution and incarceration as it concerns the prison ministry. The general public thinks that this fear is what the criminal deserves for committing the crime. The police use this fear and uncertainty to obtain information and confessions. The lawyers exploit this fear in prisoners to expedite due process of law and speed up plea bargaining. The men and women who minister in prison need to understand this fear or trauma to properly approach their prospect with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is an awesome experience to be arrested, jailed and put on trial. No one can adequately explain what it is like to be detained without going through the experience. The total change and interruption of the regular daily schedule, plus the uncertainty surrounding a sudden arrest will jolt almost anyone into a traumatic state. The lack of a foreseeable future is very frustrating. All of this contributes to the paranoia that will last a long time after the new inmate is jailed and later released back into society.

When the police arrest a person there is usually no announcement or warning as one or two squad cars converge and the handcuffs are applied and locked. Arresting officers use handcuffs for all types of crimes such as murder, rape, armed robbery and the simplest property offenses, such as bad checks, petty theft or income tax evasion. Police officers don't usually play "Mr. Nice Guy" at the time of the initial arrest and transportation to the local jail. They do their job according to set procedures.

The suspect may then be charged with several crimes (or different charges for the same event) to give the prosecutor a chance to make a deal with him or "plea bargain." If the new suspect can work out a deal to avoid a trial he will start his prison sentence immediately, or he could face several months of traumatic wait and a jury trial. In any case, the prison sentence he is facing will almost certainly begin soon. A prison experience can be a terrible thing and a traumatic event as you take up your new life in the state or federal penitentiary. It is an unforgettable day when you walk out in the yard of a major United States prison for the first time as a brand new inmate. You suddenly realize that you are a prisoner in one of the nation's penal institutions and your prison sentence is very much for real.

As you serve your time and wait for the parole board to act on your case, you go through the uncertainty of a release date. The unstable nature of many of the inmates has its effect on you as you witness violence, or experience threats that keep you constantly on guard for your own personal safety. All of these feelings slowly generate an attitude about the entire prison experience. When the day comes to walk out the front door of the prison and you *try* to start your life over, emotionally you are not the same person. You have had a terrifying experience and you will be a little different from that day on for the rest of your life.

Our job as witnesses for Jesus Christ in prison is to anticipate this fear at every stage of incarceration and adjust our ministry to this paranoia. How can we do this? There are two ways.

**First:** Be aware of the trauma and adjust your Christian message to it. You may not need to preach much "law" inside the prison wall. The prisoner may well be aware that he has broken the commandments and does *need* the *Gospel* of Jesus Christ. The trauma of arrest and jail will actually help prepare many to receive it. Men who could not be reached outside the prison wall may often have an open mind and heart for the Gospel message after they are locked up. Use your knowledge of this to deliver a better witness and be more effective ministering in prison.

One problem may be that the inmate realizes that he is in trouble with society, does not understand that he is in trouble also with God, not just because of the crime which caused him to be locked up but because of unbelief and lovelessness and all kinds of other wrongs. From God's law he needs to learn the full extent of his problem. Because of his lack of religious training, he may have little awareness of this problem.

**Second:** Consider the conduct of the inmate and particularly the ex-offender as he is affected by this terror. Actually observe him under the influence of this fear and paranoia. It will help you understand the inmates regular conversation and personal conduct. Most inmates are not dangerous but they often act defensively, by our way of thinking, outside the wall (or “on the street,” as they say in prison). This can only be explained by taking into account the paranoia that goes along with a jail sentence. Men and women who go into prison to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ must realize this natural reaction, in each inmate, as part of their ministry and adjust to it. It will work for you if you consider the consequences of this fear.

Understanding the trauma of arrest, prosecution and incarceration is important to your success as an evangelist; but more important is the fact that we understand our subject. This paranoia gains strength the longer the inmate is locked up and it lessens with each passing month after his release from jail.

It is easy to recognize this fear if you are aware of it. This explains much of the strange conduct often associated with convicts or ex-offenders. There are many factors involved in locking people up in our society today and this is one of the hidden costs that is not always counted. There is little connection between public safety and this paranoia, but understanding this obstacle will make you a much more effective missionary in prison.

May the Lord help us overcome this special problem as we minister in prisons and jails.