



Into the Light

March-April 2007

Matthew 19.26

You Are Called

By Bob Van Domelen

"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. ¹² When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen. ¹³⁻¹⁴ When you come looking for me, you'll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed. (Jeremiah 29.11-14) [The Message]

I was recently very blessed to be able to speak to some men at the Florida Intake Reception Center in Orlando. It was a blessing that was confirmed the moment we started to give praise to God. Voices rose, hands were lifted, and during that time of worship men did not consider the sins of the men on either side of them.

This last point is critical, I think, because we sinners often try to minimize our feelings of guilt or shame by looking for someone whose sins are more disgusting than our own. And when we find such a person, we say to ourselves, "See, I'm not as bad as *that* guy." But the moment those words are formed, we place another wedge between us and the healing change we seek.

Having been a resident under the care/control of the Department of Corrections, I can say from first-hand experience that prison is a place where brokenness is the common trait shared by everyone—staff included, although the wedge I just mentioned is as real and as possible for them to construct as it is for anyone else.

We all have the ability to be brutally honest about ourselves and sometimes we may even want to share a bit of our story with others. But we don't. Or if we do, we offer just enough information to make a point without putting ourselves too much at risk. In prison, too much information can be more than a risk, it can be life threatening.

Over the years, however, the offenders I have met who demonstrated the most change, the most sense of inner peace would be those who had surrendered to God, who had sought God in all things, and who trusted God to be with them when they felt led to be transparent with someone else.

I have it all planned out, plans to take care of you, not to abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for

Most of us would agree that God does not abandon us and we probably would agree that since God knows all things, He has everything planned. But when we are in prison or in the shadow of our sins, sometimes it's hard to see God's hand in taking care of us. And if we are sex offenders, it is even more difficult to believe that God plans to give us the future we hope for.

First of all, prison is a consequence that is supposed to be in direct proportion to the wrong that society says we have committed. It could be argued that in some states the length of prison sentence given is wrong or too severe, but that wrong will be assigned to others for their choices—not to us.

God is not, however, about erasing the consequence of what we do; God is about *being with us* through every part of that consequence. Most importantly, God is about reminding us that we are loved, that we are called.

Second, being cared for by God does not mean that there is always enough money for snacks at the canteen. (Some men tell me there are days when there isn't enough money for a stamp or an envelope.) Being cared for is not about having a TV or radio. It is not even about having a cellmate who doesn't snore or make life difficult. God's care for us is about having our needs and not our wants met.

Here is something I share frequently with individuals who tell me that God is absent or that life is too hard: "Turn around and see where you have been. And pay special attention to the fact that you have made it this far." God does some of His best stuff when we aren't telling God how to do it.

The point is that you *are* in the palm of God's hand (Isaiah 49.16); you are the Lord's (John 17.10). How could God ever turn His back on you? If you think it is your sin that separates you from His love, that thinking would never come from God, but it *would come* from the prince of darkness.

Third, the "plans to give you the future you hope for" part will need some explanation because from where most sex offenders stand, the future looks pretty bleak.

Most offenders who write me sooner or later share a dream to be able to start over; to find a place to live and have a job that provides for their needs; and to find a church where they can worship and be part of a faith community. Current legislation in many states makes this dream look doubtful at best.

When you get serious about finding me and want it (finding me) more than anything else

I really wonder if I will ever reach a point in my life where I will consciously want God above *everything* else, but when all is said and done, that is the goal. To have God at the center of all thought or action IS to have everything one needs, IS to have "the future you (we) hope for."

The trouble is that most of us are not ready for that kind of faith experience. We still want success and freedom on our own terms. We still want God to be as we think we need God to be. We still need God to look a certain way, maybe like some painting in church.

It might look as though I have really strayed from my opening thoughts, but not really. You see, in that worship time I could feel the connection men were making with God. I could feel (as I think they did) that prison walls and razor wire had vanished. And maybe some of the men there that afternoon felt as I did, that we were men of God standing before the throne, not inmates with a number.

I shared my offense with them, my criminal credentials as it were, that were supposed to make my comments more believable, more in tune with their situations. I didn't share everything with them and maybe this was avoidance on my part. More likely, though, it was information that did not need to be shared. I did trust them and I don't think my trust was misplaced.

I'll make sure you are not disappointed

As much as I would like to say that seeking God in all things will always work out well, sometimes your faith might run into another inmate too angry or frightened to show understanding or compassion. Such an individual might believe that only doing you bodily harm will calm their own feelings. That individual's actions or comments do not make God's word false. But that individual *will* be a test of our own beliefs.

This final part is the hardest to describe in some ways, but every person who has felt the presence of the Lord will nod in agreement.

Sometimes there IS a peace that defies all understanding in the most difficult of settings. Maybe it is just the quiet confidence in God's love for us.

Sometimes God washes through us and our bodies respond with a shiver or with tears or with a smile. In those moments, everything else seems not to matter as much. In those moments, like the time of praise and worship we had, we connect as we are meant to connect with God.

And when we connect in this manner, our sins don't define us. We don't look at one another through eyes of judgment. We look at one another and know God is present. We know God takes great joy in us. And we know beyond any doubt that we are called, called to be God's chosen now and for all time.

All things are possible with God!

Our Prayer Corner



Prayer is an incredible gift we can give one another, for there is no better thing than to lift our lives, hopes, and dreams to the altar of the Lord.

Let us pray . . .

- First and always foremost, for our victims, that each day for them is a new day, a day without fear, and a day of healing.
- For those entering prison, that they trust God with their lives and with the healing process God will bring to them.
- For those considering a ministry to sex offenders, that they will know God's pleasure in what they do and that they see God's mercy extended.
- For those who write to offenders, that the words "When I was in prison" will remind them of the love so

desperately needed by those abandoned because of their crimes.

- For chaplains who struggle with having to minister to sex offenders, that the love Jesus had for the lepers he touched will further define and strengthen their ministries.
- For churches considering what to do with sex offenders seeking to worship in their faith communities, that pastors make clear the message that it was the sick and those in need that Jesus came to heal and that their churches truly are God's house to the weary, the heavy laden, the sinners.
- For support groups to sex offenders that operate below society's radar, that they find encouragement and not condemnation for their efforts.
- For Bob, that he continues to listen for the voice of the Lord in all things; that his life be filled with healthy balance and accountability; and that he has the time needed to do everything.
- (As always) For those who are still abusing, that they will come to understand the devastation they bring on their victims and that they seek help for themselves—whatever the cost.

This newsletter is made possible by the donations of its readers and would cease to exist without that support. Please consider a tax-exempt donation to Broken Yoke Ministries, PO Box 361, Waukesha, WI 53187-0361. And if you cannot contribute, please pray!

Bits & Pieces

From *Prison Legal News*: California's Atascadero State Hospital has a five-step psychological treatment program designed to prepare those civilly committed for re-entry. The problem is that the program is so difficult only four people have ever successfully completed it.

From an inmate's letter: "The most succinct picture of my (past) life would be of me at a drive-in movie, lurking around in a stinky old restroom while everyone else was enjoying the movie with their families and friends. While the affluent banquet of life was going on for decent people, I was hanging around out back foraging in the dumpster. What a tragic insult to my Creator—who longed to be my best friend!

From Pure Life Ministries: "Online child pornography will be virtually non-existent as of 2008—at least that's the goal of some child advocates working to cut off the money supply to those smut sites.

The coalition is made up of almost two dozen major banks and credit-card companies (representing about 87% of the U.S. payments industry) that are implementing a zero-tolerance policy in dealing with pornographers posing as legitimate businesses, and thus far, the initiative has been successful.

From a letter: "What about some articles in *Into the Light from ex-sex offenders who have been out for a long time and doing well?*

Note: I detect a challenge. Any takers?

A Better Way of Living

Dave

After reading A's letter in the January-February 2007 issue of *Into the Light*, my thoughts went to all the talk and letters complaining about the lack of treatment programs available to sex offenders. Among the questions that came to mind were, "Where are you looking? Are the treatment programs offered by DOC the only programs available?"

Then another series of questions surfaced. "Do you want to participate in a program in order to: (a) speed your release, (b) improve your life, (c) help keep yourself out of prison, or (d) help insure you create no more victims?" Which is it? Hopefully your answer is more than just choice (a).

If your choice reaches beyond a speedier release, great! But where do you find a program? The DOC has some and perhaps you are waiting to be put into a group. If you haven't made your intentions clear about wanting treatment, be sure you do that with your case manager. From time to time, continue to put in a request for an update of your status. While you're waiting, however, there are things that you *can* do.

Most facilities have limited offerings from outside sources yet they do have 12 step programs like AA. Okay, you're not an alcoholic. Did you ever drink or use alcohol beyond what you know you should have been done? Were you drinking during the time you committed your crime?

AA is the Father of 12 step programs and these programs are aimed altering addictive behaviors. The ultimate goal of 12 step programs is to help us correct, change, or fix our thinking so that we make better, healthier choices.

The 12 step program is an available option for you to begin to improve your life and the lives of those around you. 12 step programs offer a place where we can not only share with others but also work on issues that we share only with God or trusted sponsor. Sponsors can often be obtained through the various home or service offices connected with the program.

Once you allow yourself to fully participate in the program, you will be able to address, work through, heal, and grow by learning to forgive yourself and others. You will be able to let go of resentments and grudges, to accept responsibility for the good and the bad in your past, as well as to apologize, make amends, and correct past wrongs. These programs also introduce you to the concept of a support group where you can be accountable for your actions and where you can develop skills for relapse prevention.

All these things are possible with God through the work of a 12 step program and the support those programs offer. Some programs operate within a Christian format; others allow the participant to define his or her higher power. Most prison chaplains have contact information either for programs running within the institution or programs available through a correspondence system.

Christian 12 step groups

Celebrate Recovery-Inside, Saddleback Church,
1 Saddleback Parkway, Lake Forest, CA 92630

Sexaholics Anonymous (SA)

P.O. Box 111910, Nashville, TN 37222-1910
(Christian and secular)

Overcomers Outreach

520 N Brookhurst St #121, Anaheim, CA 92801

Overcomers in Christ Ministries

P.O. Box 34460, NE 68134-0460

Secular 12 step groups

Sex & Love AA (SLAA)

1550 NE Loop 410 #118, San Antonio, TX 78209

AA

PO Box 459, Grand Central Station, NY, NY 10163

Editor's note: I want to thank Dave for writing the above and providing us with addresses that are accurate. The list he shared with me does not represent all possible sources for 12-step support but it does represent responsive organizations.

As in most situations, we are all individuals when it comes to the paths we need to take to produce change in our lives. I have known men for whom a 12-step program might be perhaps the most significant choice they could make.

A danger for some, however, is that the 12-step program becomes an end unto itself. Years ago, a man wrote me that he considered his program God and that he didn't need any other God.

If your behaviors are compulsive and addictive in nature, I agree with Dave and want to restate here the potential for change that can be found in a 12-step program. Pray about it. In the end, *you* will always be the one responsible for changes in your life. No one can do that for you, and from my perspective God will always be at the center of any change. Bob

Gideon

Gideon went into battle after God's assurance that He would be with him, but did Gideon have second thoughts during the battle itself? As bad as that may sound, that's how I used to feel about God. At any time during the battle God could have changed His mind and punished Gideon for having the audacity to question the demonstration and authority of His words, but God didn't. When I really buckled down and held nothing back in therapy, I did not have any second thoughts. Asking myself why, I realized that I had no choice but to trust God. Last resort, no other way to turn, it was God or nothing and I had enough of nothing in my life.

I do not expect God to change His mind about healing me and He hasn't. If He has to chastise me, I know that it will not be for something I have done, been forgiven, or chastised for before. Even if God allowed me to be punished in some way, that would not change how I trust, love, and adore Him. Whatever He would do would be for my own good.

[Thoughts shared in a letter I received from an inmate.]

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All things are possible with God

Dated Material

A Little Humor

Two fellas were watching an old cowboy movie and it came to the part when the cowboy, on his horse and at full gallop, was headed right towards the edge of a cliff.

One of the guys said to the other, "Hey, I'll bet you 10 bucks that he rides over the cliff." The other said, "You're on!"

Well the cowboy and the horse went right over the cliff. The fella that lost the bet paid up. A while later, the guy who won said, "Hey, I'm feeling a little guilty about our bet and need to make a confession ... I already have seen the movie." The other fella replied, "Well, I have also seen the movie before ... but I didn't think he'd do it again!"

