

### THE FIRST MAN WHO EVER CARED FOR ME

Not long ago, I read an article written by a sociologist who had done a study of the gangs that have become so prevalent in the inner cities of our nation. After many months of intense work he summarized his findings by describing what he found in the inner cities as "a land without fathers." As I have ministered these past years to thousands of inmates, this truth has been driven home. The absence of good dads has taken its toll on this generation, and our prisons are filled with men who can only surmise as to what it would have been like to have a dad who cared. I was again reminded of this the other day as I was holding my weekly Bible study with a group of teenagers that I am with every Wednesday. These are teenagers who have committed very serious crimes and will be given adult sentences. As I was about to leave, one of the boys who had just been sentenced to 75 years in prison asked if I could stay and talk to him alone. He said, "I wanted to tell you before I leave here to go to prison that I never knew my dad, and that you are **THE FIRST MAN WHO EVER CARED FOR ME** as a person. I guess in these last few months I kind of got a glimpse of what it would have been like to have a father who cared. I wanted to thank you for showing us how we can have a Heavenly Father who will always love us and take care of us." It may have been the most emotional event I have ever experienced with an inmate and it drove home the importance of what we are doing together as a team in this ministry.

### URNS THE CURSE INTO A BLESSING

The city of Houston was recently hit with what will certainly go down as one of the worst floods in the history of this city. The downtown sector of the city was one of the hardest hit, and that includes two of the facilities that I minister in on weekly basis. One of the facilities is twelve stories high and houses nearly 4,000 inmates. It was condemned and the inmates had to be moved into the adjacent facility. When I arrived to hold my weekly services, I was told that there would be no services due to the flood. I was told that I could enter to overflowing cells and bring copies of the Word to the men. The cellblocks were packed with men sleeping on floors and anywhere they could. When I walked into the cellblocks, many of the men gathered around me. I told the men I had an urgent message and would need to turn off the TV for about twenty minutes. We all know what the urgent message is! I began by telling them I once sat where they are, and that I understand the vicious cycle they are trapped in. As I began to share my testimony and the necessity of the new birth from John 3, the other men began to get off their bunks and gather around to hear the wonderful works of God. I preached six times in a row to a packed cellblock every time. Many men understood the new birth for the first time and expressed a desire to appropriate the finished work of Jesus Christ. It was the most overwhelming day of ministry I have ever experienced. I have never felt more exhausted and at the same time never more astounded at the workings of God. As I walked back out onto the streets of downtown Houston that smelled of stench from all of the flood debris, I was once again reminded that God is still at work no matter how devastating the present circumstances seem to be. As Nehemiah 13:2 says, "**OUR GOD TURNED THE CURSE INTO A BLESSING.**"

### EXACTLY WHAT I NEEDED TO HEAR

I recently ministered for two nights at a maximum-security unit know as Ellis I. The men at Ellis are closer to my heart than any other because they have adopted us as their missionaries. They also regularly support us with prayer and postage stamps. Every time I speak at Ellis I, those 300+ knuckleheads who attend church give me a standing ovation because we are "their missionaries." There were many new men in attendance who were hearing me for the first time and a good number of men made decisions pertaining to the will of God for their lives. One of the inmates who came to the service had just gotten transferred to Ellis and was attending his first church service. He told me after the service that he was thinking about ending his life and out of sheer desperation he decided to come to church. His life, like mine, had been a long hard

road of drug abuse, self-destruction, and rejection. I had prepared a sermon to preach that night but the Lord impressed me to share my testimony due to the fact that there were so many new men. This man told me he literally could not believe his ears as I shared how the grace of God had chased me down and changed my life. He said it was the first time he had ever heard anyone speak who had been down the same road he was on. With tears streaming down his face he said, "everything you said was **EXACTLY WHAT I NEEDED TO HEAR** and I felt like the whole message had been choreographed for me." Yes, God did orchestrate that whole evening and what this man felt was the Lord who is always a very present help in times of trouble. (Psalm 46:1) The scars from intravenous drug use were all he had to show for a life lived void of the love and grace of God but this night all had changed. The man who had come to the prison chapel ready to end his life left with a living Lord and a hope that he had never had before.

### **A WORD OF THANKS FOR YOU**

The following letter is one of many that we have received from inmates that have been touched by the team efforts of those who have helped in this work.

"I am one of those lost souls that Chaplain Downs has led to drink of eternal life and I have turned my life around to God. I am currently serving a life sentence. The only family I have is my mom and she doesn't know who I am because she has Alzheimer's. I cannot tell you how alone I have felt. I really didn't see any reason to go on. All I had was hate in my heart for everyone and everything. A friend took me to church and I heard Chaplain Downs give his testimony and I heard him talk about God and how He gave His only Son for our sins. To make a long story short I chose to walk with God that night."

There is not enough room to finish the letter nor would there ever be room to include everything that the Lord has done in so many lives. May this portion of one letter be **A WORD OF THANKS FOR YOU** and may I say thank-you for being part of this team as we work with the Lord in the field of broken lives.

**~ CHAPLAIN JOHN DOWNS**