



In the Furnace of Affliction

“God sees prison as a sacred place.” It was this astounding statement, spoken by a South African woman who voluntarily spends much of her time behind bars, that birthed the idea for this issue’s cover story.

It’s more common to think of prisons as places of retribution and punishment, as zombie mills where inmates are institutionalized to the point of losing all ambition and identity, or as schools of crime where outlaw minds congregate and scheme. In fact, prison can be any and all of these things, but it can also be much more than we might imagine. For wherever the Spirit of God is engaged and embraced, healing and freedom result. And since Jesus lives behind bars as much as anywhere else, healing and freedom are to be found in prisons around the world—especially in those prisons where the leadership understands how transformation transpires and consequently cultivates an environment conducive to holistic transformation.

“Gold is tried in the fire and acceptable men in the furnace of adversity” reads a wall inscription at the Woodbourne Correctional Facility in New York, reverberating God’s message through Isaiah: “See, I have refined you...; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction” (48:10). Paul tells us that “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3-4), so why should we be surprised to hear that prison can be a place of spiritual liberation? Joseph was refined in the furnace of Pharaoh’s dungeon. The Soviet Gulag produced Alexandr Solzhenitsyn.

One might argue that neither of those men was a real criminal, but in God’s eyes, does any one of us live within the law? T Bone Burnett nails the truth in one of my favorite songs:

I’ve seen a lot of criminals
I’ve seen a lot of crimes
Doing a lot of evil deeds
Doing a lot of time.
We speak of these men as aliens
From some forbidden race
We speak of these men as animals
We will lock in a cage.
But there’s one man I must arrest
I must interrogate
One man that I must make confess
Then rehabilitate.
There is no other I can blame
No other I can judge
No other I can cast in shame
Then require blood.
There is no crime he cannot commit
No murder too complex
His heart is filled with larceny
And violence and sex.

His heart is filled with envy
And revenge and greed
His heart is filled with nothing
His heart is filled with need.
He’s capable of anything
Of any vicious act
This criminal is dangerous
The criminal under my own hat.

We serve a holy God. All of us sin and fall short of his glory. And yet, because his mercy endures forever, he delights in meeting us where we are, when we’re ready. For many people, that ready moment first appears, inescapably, in the bowels of the criminal justice system, when hope seems most distant. An inmate serving a life sentence writes, “Yes, I’m hurting; the pain of my past is sometimes unbearable. But as a follower of Jesus Christ, I’m compelled to tell you that God’s plan for me is better than the one I had for myself. With Jesus, even in here I can have a fulfilling life, and I can serve God in here, too.”

“[These] I will bring into the fire,” God says. “I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God’” (Zech. 13:9). You’ll meet some of these people in the following pages, folks who emerge from the fire to become missionaries or mentors, wounded healers blessing God’s people on both sides of the prison walls. You’ll also meet men and women who, although never arrested for any crime, choose to spend their time in prisons, pouring out their spirits as a love offering to Christ—and discovering along the way that redemption is waiting for them, too, behind the bars. ■



Discussion questions for this issue are at: esa-online.org/PRISMDiscussion.JanFeb09