



The Voice You Can Trust:

Encouragement for the Incarcerated

by Rev. Timothy R. Carter

*Keep an eye out for the reflection questions throughout this booklet.
There is space to respond to the questions at the end.*

This Place Breaks Us Down

Most of the world has no clue. They have no idea what this place feels like. If you've never been in prison, you can't understand the sinking feeling. But unfortunately, we who are stuck in this hell know this feeling far too well. It's a slimy pit. We hate this place.

But, far more than hating this place, we hate this feeling. Whenever you're new in this place, you start off feeling like you're surrounded by all the low-life losers of society. It doesn't take long, however, for this place to make you feel like you're one of them. The free world thinks we all belong here, and they hope we stay here. Try that feeling on for size and you still only have a small clue how this feels!

This place breaks us down. It messes with our minds. The longer we're stuck in this place, the more we hear voices in our heads telling us to get used to those sinking feelings. Those voices tell us to make ourselves at home in this pit. That's a dangerous place for our minds to be when there are few other things to think about, day after day after day.

The Stronger Voice

Though that "dangerous place" is a serious reality of the mindset in prison, there is another, safer place for our minds to be, that is just as real. Among those "few other things to think about" in prison, is a way for us to get a break from those sinking feelings. Some of us who have spent a lot of time in prison want to share how those "few other things to think about" can keep our heads above water.

If you are reading this from prison, then you totally understand that there aren't many people we can trust in prison. You also understand that the few voices we can trust mostly come in the form of an occasional letter, or a visit from our family, the chaplain, or some prison ministry worker. Those are the only voices that ever tell us they care. They're the only hearts that give a flip that we're alive. We trust the ministry people when they tell us that Jesus loves us, but those voices are sometimes hard to believe when so outnumbered by the negative voices. Even when we doubt it, however, the voices that claim Jesus loves us are real and a powerful interruption to the constant flood of voices that don't care about us.

Some of you reading this are barely holding on. Some of you do not get any cards, letters, or visits or, if you do, they're very few and far between. We know that feeling because we've been there, too. Whether you hear only a few voices that care or never hear any voices that care, this booklet in your hand is for you. It's a collection of voices straight from the hearts of those who are surviving this prison hell—to those thinking you won't survive. We are telling you that we care. We care about you.

No matter what you think about God, He is real, and He cares about you very personally. His voice is stronger than any and all other voices put together, and He cares about you. One more thing: God loves you enough to respect your heart's decision to keep reading and receive His love—or not.

What other things can/do you think about to avoid a dangerous mindset?

A Prisoner Just Like You

Good decision! We are proud of you for continuing to read because He will be speaking through His Word in the pages of this booklet. God's heart will be touching your heart.

It's okay to be cautious. We know how you feel and, believe it or not, Jesus knows exactly how you feel. Jesus was arrested, taken into custody, and made a prisoner just like you:

"So the soldiers, their commanding officer, and the temple guards arrested Jesus and tied Him up." John 18:12

We do not have a Savior who cannot relate to our sufferings:

"This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same testings we do, yet He did not sin." Hebrews 4:15

He was despised and rejected by men and was totally familiar with sorrow and mistreatment. That arrest and suffering Jesus went through earned peace and healing for the rest of us prisoners:

"We turned our backs on Him and looked the other way.
He was despised, and we did not care.
Yet it was our weaknesses He carried;
it was our sorrows that weighed Him down.
And we thought His troubles were a punishment from God,
a punishment for His own sins!
But He was pierced for our rebellion,
crushed for our sins.
He was beaten so we could be whole.
He was whipped so we could be healed."
Isaiah 53:3b-5

So, keep holding on, because Jesus is holding on to you, and you're gonna be okay.

Breaking from Bondage

Most of us have been to countless alcohol and drug addiction recovery meetings, both inside the prison and outside in the free world. We go to those mostly because we are required to attend. We can agree with a lot of what is shared in those meetings, but the atmosphere usually ruins the whole experience and is a complete turnoff. It's often the same way with prison chapel services and free-world church services.

Once again, we know how you feel, and we feel the same way. This booklet, however, has none of those distractions messing with us, so let's let God have our ears and our hearts for a little while. This booklet is one of those super-helpful voices that can keep us from sinking. Its words can lift our heads above water in prison, out in the free world, and for eternity!

Those addiction recovery meetings actually cover some good stuff. In some form or another, they encourage all of us to humble ourselves and admit our wrongs rather than make excuses and blame others. They help us do some self-examination, confess our sins to God and to others, and then stay connected to God. If we had an atmosphere inside the

prison or out in the free world to really stay focused on those things, it would not only free us from the bondage to our addictions but free us from our bondage to those destructive voices in our heads in prison. Even if we are currently in a noisy cell block, a hectic dormitory, or a buzzing recreation yard, that bondage-breaking atmosphere begins here and now, privately between us and God.

*How often do you
admit your wrongs?*

Strong-Arm Thugs

You know, this is going to sound weird, but as much as we can't stand this horrible place and hate these feelings we have in here, there are a few blessings to being "prison-wise." We know all about strong-arm thugs trying to bully everybody. That experience actually helps us recognize the truth that we can trust when we hear or read it.

One example is how the Bible explains why we who are in prison are slow to trust people. Prison ministry people use the Bible to show how Jesus cares about us and loves us. In one of those demonstrations, it describes how the people of Israel were being bullied and beat down by their enemies, the Philistines:

"There were no blacksmiths in the land of Israel in those days. The Philistines wouldn't allow them for fear they would make swords and spears for the Hebrews." 1 Samuel 13:19

The Philistines were a bunch of strong-arm thugs that "hogged" metal-working technology from the Israelites and made sure that there were no blacksmiths anywhere among the Israelites, to prevent them from having swords.

That little truth from long ago is actually a big truth in our modern times. We prison inmates also have an enemy that tries to prevent us from having the "sword of the Spirit" (the Bible) and would gladly steal from us any time or privacy to read it. The devil is a very real strong-arm thug that wants to keep the voice of encouraging truth in the Bible out of our heads.

If you're struggling to believe Jesus loves you, we have been right there with you. We know how you feel, but the Bible is no longer hogged away from us, so we can read and trust its truth. We refuse to let the lying, strong-arm thug devil hog God's truth in the Bible away from us.

God Uses Our Brokenness

One of the best ways the Bible helps us to survive in prison is when God frequently shows us that it's actually normal and okay to be occasionally broken and wounded.

God really does work our brokenness together for good throughout our lives. Many of us will quickly admit that it was actually a huge blessing when God interrupted our free-world lives and allowed us to spend time in prison. We know full well that if we had stayed in the free world and continued our old habits, we would have hurt countless more people and even wound up being killed.

Sometimes we actually need parts of us to be broken so that God can rebuild us into a much better person:

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people." Genesis 50:20

"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them." Romans 8:28

When God allows some of our “old selves” to die, that can be a painful time, but He is with us in our struggles while He is shaping us into our new selves, with healthier habits for a much better life:

“So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Because of these sins, the anger of God is coming. You used to do these things when your life was still part of this world. ... you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like Him.” Colossians 3:5-7, 9b-10

We all hate to be broken, and prison is probably the form of brokenness we hate the most! We will all admit, however, that the nightmare of prison life brought us to our knees before God, which resulted in our hearts and lives being completely transformed. God protected us from ourselves by killing off the parts of us that were destroying us:

“I have refined you, but not as silver is refined. Rather, I have refined you in the furnace of suffering.” Isaiah 48:10

When the destructive voices in prison lie to us and tell us we are broken beyond repair, the voice of truth tells us that we are broken in order *to be* repaired!

*How has God worked brokenness
for good in your life?*

How to Argue with God

Everything we are sharing about God repairing our brokenness and turning our lives around did not come easy, but it's been more than worth it. All of us will tell you that we moaned and complained to God through every step of the rebuilding process of our transformation. Our faith was tested constantly and is still being tested. Yours will be also. This booklet is to help you and to warn you that prison is still prison for us followers of Christ. Though some battles last an uncomfortably long time, we eventually win every one.

One of the best places in the Bible for us to find comfort in times of prison hell is the Psalms. The book of Psalms teaches us not only that it is okay to argue with God, but it literally teaches us “how” to argue with God. An argument with God is actually communicating with our Creator about things we have not yet grown to understand.

We are even taught how to argue with ourselves! In Psalms 42 and 43, the psalmist jumps on his own case, asking himself over and over if he trusts in God. The psalmist is reminding himself that he can totally trust in God as his solid Rock and secure Foundation. All of us need to remind ourselves of this from time to time when life gets really ugly.

Let's be real, we did not get ourselves into this much trouble overnight. We have been constructing this messed-up life for many years. That being said, changing our bad habits won't come quickly. The transformation of our souls will happen instantly upon our receiving God's free gift of saving grace, but the transformation of our lives will be a process that lasts for the rest of our lives. Praise the Lord that the transformation is worth every step of the process and every painful discomfort along the way!

*Do you ever argue with
yourself or with God?*

God Lifts Us up Anyway

Check this out. It isn't just a freak accident or coincidence that the Bible speaks directly to us inmates about the sinking feelings we have in this place. The Bible tells us how Peter was doing okay in trusting Jesus.

Peter was doing so well that he even trusted Jesus when He told him that he could walk on water—and the dude actually did it! Peter actually walked on top of the water! Only for a little while, though. When the strong-arm thug devil successfully distracted Peter from keeping his eyes on Jesus, he started sinking. Even a holy dude like Peter was sinking and drowning in doubt and defeat, just like us, but Jesus lifted him up:

"Then Peter called to Him, 'Lord, if it's really You, tell me to come to You, walking on the water.'

'Yes, come,' Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink.

'Save me, Lord!' he shouted.

Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. 'You have so little faith,' Jesus said. 'Why did you doubt Me?'"

Matthew 14:28-31

Peter was basically saying: "I tried that Jesus stuff, but it didn't work," just like us, but Jesus lifted him up anyway.

A little later on, Peter got locked up and became an inmate. When he was in prison many different times (see Acts 4:3, 5:18, 5:40), Peter had to be thinking, "I tried that Jesus stuff, but it didn't work." Just like us, God lifted Peter up and out of those sinking feelings in that slimy pit over and over again:

"The night before Peter was to be placed on trial, he was asleep, fastened with two chains between two soldiers. Others stood guard at the prison gate. Suddenly, there was a bright light in the cell, and an angel of the Lord stood before Peter. The angel struck him on the side to awaken him and said, 'Quick! Get up!' And the chains fell off his wrists. Then the angel told him, 'Get dressed and put on your sandals.' And he did. 'Now put on your coat and follow me,' the angel ordered. So Peter left the cell, following the angel. But all the time he thought it was a vision. He didn't realize it was actually happening. They passed the first and second guard posts and came to the iron gate leading to the city, and this opened for them all by itself. So they passed through and started walking down the street, and then the angel suddenly left him." Acts 12:6-10

The more this place messes with our minds, the more God speaks to us through the Bible and lifts us up. We have learned the hard way that we need to trust God to lift us up. The more time we spend with God in the Bible, the more we are lifted up.

Let us share another seriously cool part of the Bible that helps us so much that we can almost hear God speaking to each of us inmates personally, right in the middle of our roughest day of pure hell in prison. The Bible actually says:

"I waited patiently for the Lord to help me,
and He turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the pit of despair,
out of the mud and the mire.
He set my feet on solid ground
and steadied me as I walked along." Psalm 40:1-2

Now THAT is the Word of God speaking very personally to inmates. THAT is a voice of truth we can trust!

While thousands of inmates never come to trust Jesus and remain stuck in the pit caused by all those hellish voices in their heads, many of us are trusting the Lord; and He has turned our prison time into a rebuilding time. Most inmates listen to those voices in their heads that break them down. We, who listen more to the voice of God through the Bible, however, are being lifted up. The more time we spend with God in the Bible, the more He helps us grow into our new selves while He protects us from our old selves.

Prison Is Hell, but Actual Hell Lasts Forever

The apostle Paul was in and out of prison many times. He describes how he was transformed. He said that he used to be the worst sinner in the whole world. Paul explains that God used his sorry, pathetic life as an example of how far we can fall into the slimy pit. Yet Paul reminds us that we can still be lifted up and forgiven by God if we will believe in Jesus and receive His free gift of grace that He offers us.

Fun fact: a whole lot of the Bible was actually written by this guy named Paul while he was in prison. Paul shares a super important truth that God not only helps us in prison but helps us avoid an even bigger hell in eternity:

"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength to do His work. He considered me trustworthy and appointed me to serve Him, even though I used to blaspheme the Name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted His people. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. Oh, how generous and gracious our Lord was! He filled me with the faith and love that come from Christ Jesus. This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners'—and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of His great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in Him and receive eternal life."
1 Timothy 1:12-16

Paul would rather be in prison with Jesus than anywhere else without Him. Paul explains that he was able to enjoy the power and strength of Christ Jesus in his heart even during his most painful days in the slimiest pit of life. Truly, God wants all of us in prison to understand that same thing.

The Bible explains that Paul spent a ton of time in prison. He was in and out a lot, like some of us, but he spent a whole lot of years in prison by the end of his life. It's really helpful to realize that if Paul can call himself the worst sinner ever and at the same time know that he is totally forgiven and redeemed by God, we can do the same! If he could look in the mirror, while in his prison cell, and see a reflection of Christ in himself, all of us prisoners can, too.

Many of us feel like we are the worst sinner ever because of all the things we have done and all the people we have hurt. But, if we don't hear any other voice, we need to hear the one from God where He promises us:

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all wickedness." 1 John 1:9

THAT voice straight from the heart of God to our heart is the greatest truth we could ever hear and know!

We all know society is not so quick to forgive us. We feel the reality that the courts and parole officers are not so quick to forgive us. But on the cross, God has already forgiven us who put our trust in Christ. AND we can experience it immediately and completely when we humble ourselves before Him and ask Him to forgive us. We don't have to get our act together first. We don't have to memorize the Bible, spend all our time in the chapel, and be "perfect" before He forgives us. His forgiveness is available to us the second we ask Him to forgive us.

So, please ... take a good look in the mirror and see yourself as a totally forgiven, redeemed, and loved child of God through faith in Christ.

*How is your experience different from
or similar to Peter's and Paul's?*

The Attacks Don't Stop

No ... being forgiven and loved by God does not mean the devil will stop messing with us in prison. As those who have come to faith in Christ, however, we see life through totally different lenses now. The voices of those we can trust (prison ministry workers, chaplains, family, whoever) are now much louder and more powerful even if they are not the voices we hear most often. The devil will keep throwing his lies and discouraging voices at us. Like we've been saying, God speaks to us through the Bible, and He has a lot to say about the devil attacking us so much.

We read in 2 Chronicles 20 of God's people being attacked by the devil's people. The Israelites cry out to God, telling Him that they feel so powerless against all these attacks. They are smart enough, however, to also tell God that their eyes are still on Him, trusting in Him. God responds through a prophet and tells them:

"This is what the Lord says: Do not be afraid! Don't be discouraged by this mighty army, for the battle is not yours, but God's." 2 Chronicles 20:15b

Isn't that an amazing promise? We all need to remember that promise from God while we are in prison, because the bully-thug devil will keep messing with us. Remember that you no longer need to feel alone because you're not. God is with you!

Overcoming Distractions

We don't ever need to get used to feeling defeated. We do, however, need to get used to being distracted. Even when we have been reading the Bible regularly and are becoming more encouraged, all hell occasionally breaks loose in prison, and it's either a lockdown or a shakedown or fools messing with us.

Sometimes it's hard to keep our eyes on the Lord even when we are totally committed to following Christ. Life inside this place proves to us that the devil is not only real, but he is alive and active inside this place and inside the hearts of so many of the people in here.

We can all admit the devil has won a lot of battles over us in our past. We don't live in our past, but it helps to remember why we lost those battles, along with the consequences of losing those battles. The devil wanted us to end up in prison. He helped us every step of the way to get here and is still trying to distract us from the truth while in here.

We praise God for overcoming those distractions and destructive voices by sending prison ministry people and Bible booklets like this one at just the right time—when we thought we couldn't sink any lower. We believers have learned how to overcome the biggest distractions in prison by fighting against them God's way—on our knees!

The Bible of prison ministry people is now our Bible, and their ability to fight is now our ability to fight the good fight of faith. As Paul wrote to Timothy, "Fight the good fight for the true faith. Hold tightly to the eternal life to which God has called you, which you have declared so well before many witnesses" (1 Timothy 6:12). The devil can bring on-lockdowns, shakedowns, and fools our way, but he won't win like he did in our past. We can't undo the past, but in Christ we can change the future!

Even though you're still in prison, God is right there with you, and you're gonna be okay!

How do you ignore the devil's voice and listen to God's instead, even when the Bible or ministry workers are not available?

You Are Now Redeemed and Equipped

As you have been reading through this booklet, God has been knocking on your heart's door. Just as you are, with all your past and problems, God is knocking on your heart's door right now. He is offering you the same free gift He offered to each of us. We share His transforming Word filled with both the gentle love and tough love we all need and can all trust.

"God is so rich in mercy, and He loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, He gave us life when He raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) For He raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of His grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all He has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus. God saved you by His grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things He planned for us long ago." Ephesians 2:4-10

We are praying for you! Remember a few things. When you are proclaiming Jesus is Lord ... *your* Lord ... that proclamation from your heart is a gift of God Himself, as we just read. Because of His free gift, you are a brand new person. The Bible says, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3b). When that proclamation comes from your lips and your heart—it first came from God's heart as a gift to you. You are now His child, and you now have a new future in Christ.

And let us share something about your future that might blow your mind right now in the middle of your time in prison. As a redeemed child of God, you now have what all of us have. We all have the ability to not only get out of prison as a new creation with a new heart, but we also have the ability to voluntarily walk back into prison someday, bringing the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to share with inmates who are broken and sinking into a slimy pit from the hellish voices in their heads. It's true. You are uniquely qualified because of two things:

1. Christ in you
2. Your experience in prison

Now you know why this booklet is a proclamation of God's Word speaking to you through the united hearts of hundreds of us who have been exactly where you are, have endured exactly what you're enduring, and have overcome by the power of Jesus Christ in them:

"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in Me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world." John 16:33

Keep fighting the good fight of faith in Christ! God loves you! We love you! Amen!

Reflection Questions:

*What other things can/do you think about
to avoid a dangerous mindset?*

*How often do you
admit your wrongs?*

*How has God worked brokenness
for good in your life?*

*Do you ever argue with
yourself or with God?*

*How is your experience different from
or similar to Peter's and Paul's?*

*How do you ignore the devil's voice and listen to God's instead,
even when the Bible or ministry workers are not available?*

Notes:

Before God saved and redeemed his life, Rev. Timothy R. Carter participated in the executions of more than 150 inmates during his years of service on the Texas State Penitentiary death squad. Now he serves as the Life Care pastor at a church in Indiana. He has written a book about his experiences called *The Executioner's Redemption*.



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