

Have You Ever Been In Prison?

by Rev. Frank Rose

Fortunately, comparatively few of us have had that degrading and humiliating experience. People who have will be very sensitive to the message in Psalm 142 which ends with the prayer, "Bring my soul out of prison that I may praise your name; the righteous shall surround me for You shall deal bountifully with me."

Of course, not all people are in prison because of crimes. Many experience being in prison in time of war or perhaps they're political prisoners of some kind. There are comparatively few stories in the Old Testament about people in prison, partially because of all the regulations and laws given in the Books of Moses which stipulate different crimes and their punishments--none of the punishments ever involved going to prison. In the early days of the Hebrew people, it was not known what prison was; it was not part of their culture. Joseph was cast into a prison. First of all, he was a slave which is a kind of imprisonment, but then when he was in Egypt, he was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife--found himself in prison and later emerged from that prison to become the second ruler in all of Egypt--but that was an Egyptian prison. Samson was put into a prison and that was a Philistine prison. The first time, you hear of anyone of the Children of Israel being put into prison by their own people is in the time of the Kings; especially the story of the Prophet Jeremiah, who was repeatedly cast into prison because his message was so unpopular.

So when the people heard the Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah was going to come, and among other things, was going to release them from prison, you can't help but wonder as to what meaning that held for them, since so few of them had had the prison experience. There is a prophecy in Isaiah 61: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor: He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captive, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound." And this prophecy is repeated in different words in other places; that's one of the reasons why the Messiah was coming was to release people from prison.

The first time Jesus stood up to speak in the synagogue at Nazareth he quoted that part of the 61 chapter of Isaiah, and having read it, He then

said: "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your ears." Now, do you know of any story in the New Testament, of Jesus releasing someone from prison? John The Baptist, who prepared the way of the Lord and who baptized Him, was cast into prison by the wicked Herod and there is no indication in the Gospels that Jesus ever did anything to release him. Eventually, he was beheaded in prison, and yet Jesus said: "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your ears." He was already releasing people from prison. Now what prison was that?

Clearly, it was not some external prison. What was the prison in which people found themselves, in which the Messiah had come to deliver them from? You know how you can be imprisoned by your body, Think of a person who is suffering from Alzhiemers Disease--how their body becomes like a prison to them--and even their minds can't operate properly, simply because of a physical condition. Any kind of physical limitation is the nature of an imprisonment and if we listen too much to the bodily senses and base our whole life on our sense experience, our mind becomes very limited by people who say "Well, I don't believe in a life after death; I've never seen the Spiritual World. I've never met anyone who has come back from the Spiritual World." So they are unable to accept the concept of Life After Death because they are imprisoned by their bodies, Their thoughts are overly dominated by sensual things. Remember in the early days of space travel; one of the space ships went out and an atheist jubilantly reported that God must not exist, because here Mankind had traveled to the moon and no one had seen God on the journey! Notice the sensual thinking that God, if He is real, must be visible to the physical eyes! So we all tend to be limited because we have a body in the Natural World and sometimes it's very difficult to rise above the appearances of that body--to see beyond the surface--to see the, reality. If you saw a person physically in prison you might not realize that their spirit was free and perhaps the jailer was more imprisoned than the prisoner, because of a mental attitude. Being in prison is much more a state of mind. Think of people who suffer with addictions, and in that sense they are prisoners of their own bodies. They cannot stop themselves from eating or drinking or taking in certain substances. They have lost control; as much as their mind might say: "I won't do this anymore," yet the body keeps on doing it. They are prisoners in a very tragic sense. But having a body itself is a kind of imprisonment; because the spirit is beyond the body, it has its own level of reality and there are many times in which we have to arise above the appearance that we exist only within the limits of our physical frame--to

realize that we are Spiritual Beings and the body is only a very small part of our life. When the body grows old, our spirit does not grow old and when the body dies, we do not die--but to think like that, we have to be released from the domination of physical appearances. When Jesus taught, He confronted the people with their thinking--their thought patterns, You may remember the phrase: "You have heard it was said to them of old times, that I say unto you." One of them we read was a recitation "You heard that it was said to them of old times--you shall not murder!" People who had that concept of the Fifth Commandment, that it was concerned with the murder of the physical body, had no awareness that their inner hatred and bitterness was a form of murder and therefore their thinking was very limited and it made them such that they wouldn't even take responsibility for the inner attitudes or thoughts, They thought so long as they obeyed the letter of the Law, they were: "Right with God." Now that thinking was a kind of prison bar which limits the way in which they approached life. Every time the Lord spoke He confronted their "traditional" thinking. He told them to cleanse the inside of the cup and platter, saying that ritual wasn't going to get them to Heaven, but an inner spirit of Love and Charity would. He told them they should love their enemies--that they should forgive--they should let go of the pattern of wrong doing and revenge because that pattern, which we still see in the world today, is a kind of spiritual prison. People get caught in that and they're locked into a way of thinking that makes it almost impossible for them to see anything else, That's why it says in the Psalm: "Bring my soul out of prison." Having the body in prison is one thing--having the soul in prison is even worse and your soul is in prison when your thoughts are false or when your emotions are totally negative.

During the Second World War, there was a Christian Thinker, Clergyman, Philosopher named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He spent many years in prison and eventually died in prison. He wrote a book entitled "Letters From Prison." The early letters were written after he had been in jail for only a short while and one of the first things he observed was that while the body is in prison, the mind does not have to be. And then he says this: "The important thing is to make the best use of one's possessions and capabilities -there are still plenty left and to accept the limits of the situation, by which I mean, not giving way to feelings of resentment and discontent," You see, he realized that thing that would truly imprison him was not the bars--was not the walls, but that spirit of resentment and discontent. "I've never realized so clearly what the Bible

and Luther meant by Spiritual Trial. Quite suddenly, for no apparent reason, whether physical or psychological, the peace and placidity which have been a mainstay hitherto began to waver; and the fear, in Jeremiah's Expressive Phase, becomes that defiant and despondent thing one cannot fathom. It is like an invasion from the outside, as though evil powers were trying to deprive one of life's dearest treasures." And then he adds: "But it is a wholesome and necessary experience which helps one to better understand human life."

What then is prison? For much of his time in prison, Bonhoeffer was able to maintain an attitude of freedom and peace and he could see that there were times when his heart was invaded by these destructive forces which were all on a mental level; negative feelings of bitterness--despondency, despair, resentment--that was the prison he had to fear. And don't we know the same kind of prison? Think of what prejudice does to imprison the mind. Imagine if you have a view that a certain race of people, a certain culture of people, are all bad, how that limits your life. How you put yourself in prison due to your own prejudices. Suppose you were negative to all black people, then you would never be able to meet a black person and see them as a real human being and benefit from that relationship. You're imprisoned because of your own way of thinking, We all need to be liberated from this kind of spiritual limitation and spiritual blindness. That's why it's interesting in one of the prophecies of the Lords Coming, "The opening of the blind eyes" is put right alongside "Delivering people from prison," This is Isaiah 42: "I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, as a light unto the Gentiles, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house," Jesus never physically delivered anyone from prison but every time He spoke, He was opening their eyes and delivering them from their prison of darkness--from negative thinking--from prejudice--from an attitude of mind that judges all things on the basis of appearances and is not willing to be lifted up to a higher level. Whenever we are in a destructive frame of mind, self-pitying, resentful of others, we find ourselves in prison. And maybe you have known that kind of state in which you felt the limitations and you desperately wanted to get out. How do you break down those walls; how do you liberate yourself from that confined way of thinking and being? The Lord invites us to escape from prison by lifting our minds to a higher level. Just take for example, the prison of the body and the prison of our own personality. Ever stop to think that ones personality is a kind of prison--that you think of yourself in a

certain way--others think of you in that way and your true spirit may be very different than your personality. So how do you break out of that prison of yours; those physical limitations or what people think of you or what you think of yourself? One way is to simply observe yourself and raise your mind to a higher level and realize that your body and your personality are a very small part of your total essence; that you are truly a Spiritual Being, created to live forever and that many of the things that are important to you in your life right now are just temporary; things that are active for awhile, but they're not part of your true essence or your true personality. That's why in the Psalms the person prays to escape from the prison by flying: "Oh that I had wings of a dove, for then I would fly away and be at rest." You can imagine a person sitting in a physical prison and using the wings of thought to raise their minds above the limitations in which they find themselves, and suddenly they're free, Whether we're in physical prison or not, we can liberate ourselves by meditation and by elevating the mind. If you think of the problems that you face in your life, the things you find so discouraging and difficult to deal with just lift your mind to a higher level and let them come into a better perspective and you will be freed. And the most wonderful thing is as you release yourself from prison, you also release other people, for we tend to put other people in a box: by our attitudes toward them, by our judgments about them. Maybe you've had the experience of other people having thoughts about you that you say to yourself, "I'm not like that--I'm not the kind of person that other people think I am!" So if we become more liberated in our own thinking, able to think on a higher spiritual level, we will liberate other people and we will never say as we approach a person: "I know you!" For how much do we really know of one another--where I'm willing to judge you or I'm willing to interpret your life? But rather, I might say: "I am more than my body, I am more than my personality, I am more than my roles in life and therefore the person I am talking to is much greater than what I see--and the limited thoughts I have about him." In this process we need, most of all, to be liberated from the tyranny of having to be right all the time.

Let us accept with joy, in the fact that, in a certain sense, we are nothing--we're just created out of the dust of the Earth and our loving Creator sees in us an infinite potential on the Spiritual level. So we let go of our pride, we let go of our self image and we lift our thought upwards and then we find that we are liberated, we are set free, we are given a kind of internal peace, surrounded by that spirit of love and acceptance.

Have you ever been in prison? Of course you have! We all have! There are many times in life when, mentally, we are in prison. The Lord has promised that He will come and deliver us from prison; to rescue us from that prison, if we but turn to Him, lift our thoughts to a higher level, want to rise above the limitations of time--of space--of personality, and see things more as He sees them, from an eternal and loving point of view. Amen

Lessons: Psalm 142, Luke 4-16, AC 5096