



In Prison, and You Visited Me

By Dennis R. Robertson

Seven years isn't such a long time, but when you're spending that time in San Quentin, each minute seems to have its own sunrise and sunset. George Jackson (not his real name) has spent the last seven years of his life in that California prison, and he'll spend the remainder of it there.

Besides working at his prison job (dishwasher) and playing a bit of handball, he writes. Lying on a hard, metal cot in a room with no windows, he records each day's thoughts and feelings in sort of a self-descriptive novel about his life behind bars.

George is no different than most of the other prisoners, except that he's now a Christian — a member of the Worldwide Church of God. And he's growing in the grace and knowledge of

Jesus Christ because someone in God's Church, in an act of unselfish Christian concern and love, cared enough to visit him — a total stranger.

"Before my conversion, I was completely alone," George wrote to *The Good News*. "I had a mother, a father, sisters, a wife and two kids, and in six years I had received one letter from my mother. It's hard to believe that a total stranger took me in and made my life worth living again."

In Matthew 25, Christ clearly shows the importance God places on our individual acts of mercy for those who are less fortunate.

"When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate

them from one another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

"Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me" (Matt. 25:31-36).

Because of their selflessness in service to Christ, these righteous ones were given a place in the Kingdom of God. But they could not understand Christ's mercy and their great reward.

"Then shall the righteous answer

him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?" (verses 37-39). Christ's answer, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (verse 40).

The epilogue of the story is that those who did not serve and comfort

even the least of the brethren went away into everlasting punishment. They failed to understand what true religion is all about.

God says that pure religion is this, "To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself [oneself] unspotted from the world" (Jas. 1:27).

Our individual responsibility

Each of us has a personal, individual responsibility placed on us by Je-

sus Christ to serve our brothers with genuine concern. Christ said that whosoever desired to be great in His Kingdom could show his greatness through service (Matt. 20:26-27). He also prophesied that in the end time as lawlessness abounds, people's hearts will harden, and the love of many will grow cold.

That attitude can affect even God's elect, and we must guard against it with all our might and the power of God. Many in the Church have already allowed this attitude of nonconcern to penetrate their defenses. It is obvious by their works — or lack of them.

More than a quarter of a million men and women are serving time in state or federal prisons in the United States alone — thousands more worldwide. When was the last time you visited one of them?

And there are 24 million poverty-level Americans from families that earn less than \$6,500 a year, which is more money than millions of Third World families will see in their lifetime. When did you last give any of them a loaf of bread or a pair of shoes? And how long has it been since you've comforted just one lonely stranger?

Most of us fall far short in our personal responsibilities as Christians. Reasons abound for not caring and not showing concern through good works. But there are no excuses. You are being judged, right now, by your actions, and it is those actions that determine your position in the Kingdom of God.

"The time has evidently arrived for God's judgment to begin, and it is beginning at his own House . . . And if it is true that we are living in a time of judgment, then those who suffer according to God's will can only commit their souls to their faithful creator, and go on *doing all the good they can*" (I Pet. 4:17, 19, Phillips translation).

Created for good works

The performance of good works is as central to the concept of Christianity as is belief in Christ and His teachings. From the beginning, God's Church and His people have been committed to doing good. Paul wrote in Ephesians

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Prison Program

Thirty Ambassador College students are practicing what we preach in a controlled prisoner visitation program in California that has successfully reduced the number of returnees there by one third.

The program, called Match 2, is designed to help parolees make the transition to normal life and reduce their chance of returning to prison after their release. By matching convicts who are eligible for parole with responsible people from the outside, the trauma of reentering society is diminished.

"Those prisoners who request visits are reaching out for friendship and a chance to share their lives with a stable influence," said Ambassador graduate Ron Guizado. "How can I deny those things to someone when I have them to give? I can't save the world, but can I just say, prisoner, be you warmed and filled?"

The M2 program was begun in Washington state by Richard Simmons, a Presbyterian minister concerned over the number of ex-convicts returning to prison. In his research he noted that recidivism was the lowest (5 percent) in the Netherlands, the only country that had organized a prison visiting system. The program, in operation since 1849, matched a sponsor with a prisoner of similar interests. Mr. Simmons realized that such a program would also work in the United States.

A prisoner in the program is matched, in his final year in jail, with a responsible person who is compatible with him. Each visitor is asked to visit once a month for the year, and they must agree to spend all day with their match on the day

of his or her release from prison.

Many of the Ambassador College students have been matched with prisoners, most at the California Correctional Institution at Tehachapi, Calif. Those participating have found it to be a rewarding experience.

John Curry said: "Three weeks ago I made my first visit as an M2 sponsor . . . We hit it off right from the beginning and had a very interesting conversation for 1½ hours.

"For myself," John continued, "I was able to get a better insight of what prison life is like, and the problems that inmates face."

According to Mark McCullough: "After two visits with my partner in the M2 program I have learned that it takes time and patience and a little effort to really get to know and understand the person. These prisoners are lonely for someone to just talk to and to spell out how they really feel inside. This helps them to get to know themselves better also."

"Being in prison for a number of years without any visitors," said Randy Martens, "can extinguish any spark of hope residing in a person. It's surprising how even a brief show of concern toward a person can turn their life around."

The value of what the students are doing is perhaps summed up in this message sent by one of the prisoners to his sponsor: "I'd like to thank you for getting into a program such as this. I feel you must be a special kind of a person to want to give up your time for an unknown individual in prison, and I will do my best to make it as equally rewarding to you as it will be to myself." — *By John Halford* □

PERSONAL

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will be Satan's churches. The Sardis era in the main had become spiritually dead — had rejected too much of GOD'S TRUTH — was accomplishing virtually NOTHING in spreading the true Gospel to the world (indeed had no clear conception of what that Gospel is).

The Laodicean church will be characterized by spiritual lukewarmness — half of its membership (Matt. 25:1-13) will be shut out of the Kingdom of God.

But, the BAD NEWS, as it appears today, my dear brethren, is that we, undoubtedly of the Philadelphia era — my son's ridicule notwithstanding — are in serious danger of BECOMING also the Laodicean era. I am personally much concerned about that. If

YOU are NOT concerned, then indeed we are in mortal DANGER.

Attempts to destroy Church

Satan is pulling out ALL STOPS now to DESTROY THIS CHURCH OF GOD! No matter how angrily and vehemently they deny it, SATAN is USING these former leaders, and they are yielding completely to Satan's will! I no longer hesitate to call a spade a spade!

But what Jesus Christ raised up is the CHURCH OF GOD. Today it encompasses the earth, so we call it the WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD! Garner Ted bragged to me that HE built this Church. It was BUILT when he was 3 years old!

Much much later, my son was allowed to have microphones before him that went out on hundreds of stations.

But what CHRIST BUILT through

his father placed those microphones before him. He STARTED nothing! He pioneered NOTHING!

But a letter from one woman member illustrates what happened. She first heard of us through one of my son's TV programs and wrote for literature. She read booklets that I wrote, on what is salvation?, what is the Kingdom of God?, what do you mean, "BORN AGAIN?" etc. And THESE BOOKLETS led to her conversion. There have been many like that.

Let me close with one thought. It is now a little late in life for me to turn to Satan's way, as so many others in high places have done.

God never yet has let one through whom He STARTED a great project turn wrong — and He has never yet let such an appointed leader of His die until his job was FINISHED! □

In Prison

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that this is the very reason for our existence:

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10, Revised Standard Version).

The Church is doing many great works in nations around the earth. The Work — as it is called — has grown from a small West Coast operation in the United States to a worldwide concern expending millions of dollars a year to do God's Work. Today, as prophesied, we're doing an even greater work than Christ Himself did.

Each month the Work mails millions of magazines and other pieces of literature, and multimillions of watts of radio and television power are used in fulfilling our commission.

But what about you as an individual Christian and your own responsibility in doing good works? Is just being a part of an organization enough? God says it isn't!

It is all too easy for individuals involved in a mass effort to hide behind the skirt of corporate religion, neglecting their own spiritual duties.

But God says at the judgment, He will render to every man according to his deeds, not according to the deeds of the Church he belongs to (Rom. 2:6).

We cannot depend on the Church's record for our own salvation. Too many of us, resting on the laurels of the organization, feel justified by the dollars we send in and the prayers we send up. Instead of being active Christians, we are acting Christians, and the latter will be spewed out of God's mouth at the judgment.

Jesus hates hypocrisy. To him religion is not an exercise in intellectual vanity or self-righteous satisfaction. It is actively living and doing the commandments of God. He continually attacked the scribes and Pharisees for pretending to be something they were not.

These religious leaders of Jesus' time were the antithesis of true religion. They were continually wrapped up in numerous talmudic dos and don'ts while neglecting the more serious considerations of outgoing love and concern for their brothers.

Faith through works

Brethren, it is up to Christ to satisfy the needs of a world that is dying from spiritual malnutrition. As Jesus said in John 6, "I am the bread of

life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).

But as disciples of Christ and heirs of His Kingdom it is up to each of us, individually, to bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the royal law of Christ. We are hypocrites if we say we have faith in the commandments and do not show that faith through works.

"What does it profit, my brethren, though a man say he has faith, and have not works? can faith save him?"

"If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be you warmed and filled; notwithstanding you give them not those things which are needful to the body; what does it profit?"

"Even so faith, if it has not works, is dead, being alone" (Jas. 2:15-17, paraphrased).

Thousands, like George Jackson, are alone in this world. Millions more are hungry and naked. And they all are made in the image of God.

If you've been lax in showing real concern for others, especially your own brethren, start immediately to practice the love and concern that God's Church has preached for years. In so doing you will be establishing your place in the Kingdom of God. □