BELLY OF THE BEAST

Webster defines ME, (prison), as a place for confinement of criminals, and jail as confinement or restraint. To do that, I must have either walls or wire fences.

Inside these walls I have cells or dorms. In most prisons, an inmate does not have as much usable room as a dog in a pound. Men, women, boys and girls are sent to me as punishment, not for punishment, as is often the case.

I am not friendly; I put fear in most, not all. In time I will put fear in most. Behind my fences there are killings, attempted killings, rape, beating, hate and anger; very little love.

Most of those I devour would not be here if they have money or education. I have a rating system from Level One, which is minimum custody, to Level Six, maximum security and hell on earth.

It’s funny — as bad as I can be, most who leave come back, mostly because the system that brings them here does nothing to change the inmate.

THE CELL...

...into which my inmates are placed is a small room about the size of a bathroom. It may have a window; it will have a toilet and sink. There will be two bunks and little else; often they cram three in there. Often they spend twenty-four hours a day in there.

Because of over-crowding, their two or three meals are sack lunches. Common fare is two pieces of bread with a piece of lettuce and a piece of meat or cheese.

THE INMATE:

A person convicted of a crime, nothing to do with guilt, or that guilt is not somewhat justified. How does one become an in-mate? You are arrested for a crime, taken to a jail and booked, and told your rights and that you need an attorney. If you don’t have money, the court will provide a Public Defender out of a pool of attorneys. Trying to save money, the State will now try to plea bargain to save costs. This is called plea-bargaining. Let’s give you an example: you are arrested for a crime you did not commit! In jail they try to get you to confess; this process can be as
brutal as prison. The name of the game is convictions. They cannot break you after hours of trying. The police or prosecutor offers a deal. They tell you the crime you did not commit will get you 25 years in prison if you go to court. Now they tell you that if you confess, you will only get two years. Put those numbers in your head: you can serve 25 years, if you make it, or two. You don’t have money to fight it (The Rich Get Richer, The Poor Get Prison). Too big a gamble. You go to prison, the guilty person is free. The State gets credit for a conviction; no trial. There is no justice in the justice system. The figures vary, but as many as 25% in prison are not guilty. Now you are given a number and that is what you become.

THE FISH:

No one knows why, but new inmates are called fish. Since we are using you as an example, you enter The Belly of The Beast. You are quarantined, in an enforced system to get you used to prison life. There are predators everywhere. If you are young and not street-wise, you probably will be raped. Prison gangs will try to engulf you. You may be issued used underwear, dirty sheets and blankets. When out of quarantine, you are placed in your cell – little choice with whom you are to share it. No jobs or school; now it’s dead time.

Your family sends you money and you go to the high-priced prison store; on the way to your cell, one of the gangs takes your canteen. There is nothing you can do about it. If you tell, you’re a snitch. Snitches are marked men or women, who will be hurt.

HARD TIME:

With massive overcrowding, serious funding shortage, lack of jobs and school, all time is hard time. The system is not built to do rehabilitation or regeneration.

INMATES:

Most come from dysfunctional homes; many are uneducated. With violence so high, lockdowns happen often. A lockdown means 23, maybe even 24 hours a day in a cell feeding conditions already mentioned. With most states on a lock-them-up-throw-away-the-key policy, many prisons have serious geriatric problems. This creates additional spending of money prisons do not have. We have never defended any criminal or any crime they commit. Logic says, if men and women in prison do not change for the better, they get worse. I remember our first meal with inmates. Yvonne did draw a bit of extra attention. Being a vegetarian, lunch was lettuce and bread.

So often, late at night, we would walk the hall, hearing hard-core men and women crying. Suicide watch is much more in place and much more common.

PRISON GANGS:

There are too many, the main ones being Neta; Aryan Brotherhood; Black Guerilla Family; La Nuestra; Texas Syndicate; Crips; Bloods. Look these up on your computer. These and many
other gangs control drugs, tobacco, alcohol, prostitution; assaults and murder. Yes, all these things go on in prison. Much is done with the help of correctional officers. Most gangs are blood in (take blood), blood out (lose Blood). Many times inmates are forced to join for protection. Often inmates with money hire them for protection. The system is broke and needs fixing; part of this is.

YOU ENTER THE BELLY OF THE BEAST:

Paper Sunshine, the Pen Friend Program, can and will, change many an inmate. Without going into the details of the auto accident, some permanent damage was done to us.

Yvonne is restricted and will be reading most of the mail. We will be writing notes to help you deal with any problems, so we need everyone’s e-mail address. It will help if you e-mail us with who you are writing. We are now opening up this program to more inmates — some very difficult ones. These I will be handling. We will also be taking over any you might be having trouble with.

We have learned the hard way, that some of you were matched with men or women you could not handle. If that happens, we will re-assign you both.

From walking the tiers in many a prison, I will tell you Jesus is on the Main Line. Now, a bit of a lesson: A man or woman in a cell without a radio, TV, or friend, is a person paying a very high price for the crime they committed. It may be a price they deserve, but my Lord says, “To be free in Him is to be free, indeed.”

Key your letters to the tone of theirs. Become a friend who is a Christian and talk about what Jesus has done for you. Don’t be preachy, be friendly. Don’t be overly friendly.

It’s easy to misunderstand friendship when they have little of it. Don’t talk about your problems, they have enough of theirs.

Often folks are offended when an inmate doesn’t reply right away. Their letters are read by staff, so they are limited. Try to find a common ground; this may be hard. If you are not sure, ask us. Not everyone has a computer, but we all know someone who has one. Have that person send your question.

Please, dear friends, pray for the person you’re matched with. Us also. We have a bunch of folks making this a mission field and they write lots of inmates. Join them.

IF YOU FEEL YOU CANNOT WRITE, help the Pen Friend/ Paper Sunshine ministry with donations. When a letter is mailed to us, we print it, put it in an envelope, pay the postage to get it to the inmate, and then pay the postage getting it back to you. Also, you can now make donations via Credit Card at our web page, in a secure room. We also can use a laptop so that when we move around, we can keep up with questions.

JUST ONE:
It happened so long ago I almost forgot. When so many, mainly my wife, took an interest in me, and I was led to Christ and this ministry, almost with the blink of an eye, so much changed. One day, one man, and my wife.

I remember driving to San Quentin, a pretty foggy day. There was a long walk from the parking lot to a series of locked gates we had to go through.

As usual, we drew keys and headed off to “C” Section. Growing up on the streets of this world, I had been around fear, but never experienced it.

In this cell block, you could feel the fear and hate. Five tiers of 50 cells each housed 250 of the hardest core inmates anywhere. Across from the cells was a gun rail manned by a guard with a rifle. A place we chose to minister.

We carried cases with small Bibles, books, writing material, reading material, and went to every cell.

A guard called me to give a Death Notice to an inmate. Over the next two years, I would give him two others: a father and two brothers, all killed by gang violence in Los Angeles. I was able to spend a bit of extra time with this man, losing my wife in the process. It was in this cell block that we received the nickname “The God Squad.” I found her, we checked the chapel, and left. As we drove over the Golden Gate, she told me of a meeting she had with a man who had been locked up for a very long time. In all those years locked up, he had never received a letter or any kind of mail. This meeting would change the direction of Someone Cares, a name given our ministry, because we did. Yvonne promised the man she would arrange for someone to write, and she did.

Several weeks later, back there, every inmate on his run (group of cells) wanted a Pen Friend. “C” Section, in the Belly of The Beast, was the birthplace of the “Pen Friend Program,” “Paper Sunshine.”

An inmate there later told us he wrote to himself to hear his name called so he would not be embarrassed.

Jesus did say, folks, “I was in prison and you visited me not.”

You can visit via pen and paper, computer, and all of Heaven will cheer.

Is it easy? No.

Can you be disappointed? Yes.

Can the outcome be another one on the way to heaven? You bet!!!

**DO I COUNT?**

My name is Carl. My sentence double life and a day. My crime: murder.

I’m a member of a prison gang and not a Christian. I really don’t know why I’m even writing
this. I called a friend where he was and found out he is one bad dude.

The date: 1982.

I wrote Carl, along with Don Hawkins on death row. Yvonne and I also took turns writing and we both prayed a lot. Don was a great experience, but Carl was hard, hard core. I then got a request from a couple of ex-biker gang members who had accepted Christ and left the gang. I jumped at the chance. It took almost a year and two visits, but Carl was able to see the Light of Jesus and got out of the darkness. We received the following in 1998:

Don, I want to thank you and Yvonne for my friends and my friend, Jesus. I knew it would be tough to be a Christian in prison and it was. I kept my eye on HIM.

I have been told that I have a tumor on my brain and my time is short, and I say, Amen. I will rest awhile, then we will all meet in Heaven.

Might I offer a suggestion? Guys like I was need a friend like us. Get free people from my background to take the first step and then introduce them to a Christian. The last time I saw you guys, we sang,

“Soon, and Very Soon”.
Yep!
God Bless,
Carl.

YVONNE’S CORNER:

This might sound depressing, the way prison; but you need to know a little bit about where and how one survives this. It is only by the grace of God that the inmates, employees, and volunteers make it from day to day. Just a simple post card can bring them so much happiness. Do you have time to share maybe just once or twice a month? I can speak from experience; I know that I received such a blessing from visiting each and every one. Even staff needs encouraging. I have learned to pray without ceasing. We serve a wonderful God; please spread the word so that we may soon see Jesus.

JEAN’S JOTTINGS Carl’s letter to Don & Yvonne touched my heart, as I, too, once wrote many letters back and forth to Don Hawkins. He became my “nephew,” and I was “Auntie Jean.” He had a heart for those with whom he corresponded, and I’m certain he led many to God’s throne of grace where they found unconditional forgiveness.

He had a writing ministry from his cell, where he was in lockdown 23 hours a day.

An inmate who’s touched by a Pen Friend on the path to Heaven can experience Jesus’ clasping both their hands in His, joined forever on the journey. There’s going to be a huge “family reunion” in Heaven, of Pen Friends who were united by Someone Cares, you and Jesus.

Moms and Dads, pray with your children who read these newsletters, and have them write little notes, cards, and drawings to tuck into your letters to those in prison.
We need folks to write, and those who can’t, to give. Have your church bulletin editor and friends help cover requests for the 50+ new requests coming in for Pen Friends each day! Can you spare a little time to cheer an inmate for Jesus each month? Nothing is more exciting than working for Him.

Each one (inmate) wants one (Pen Friend). Don & Yvonne can’t do this on their own. We need you.

In Loving Memory of

Don Hawkins

Executed at McAlester, OK Prison

April 8, 2003

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