



“The Joy of the Lord” **A Prison Teaching Experience**

Background A few years ago one of our PBT DVD’s was used in the Sunday evening worship service at the Ellsworth, Kansas Correctional Facility (ECF). The 60 inmates attending that evening must have found something intriguing about my teaching on biblical context because they asked for more of “those kinds of DVDs.” Viewing those DVDs eventually led to an invitation from the Warden and the Chaplains to bring our “Bible Alive” multi-media contextual immersion experience to the prison. This report tries to describe that experience.

My Initial Reactions When the prison seminar invitation was first received, I was both excited and also apprehensive. I’ve never taught in a prison setting. What do I know about their world? PBT’s ministry is all about context, yet I had no context at all for what it means to be incarcerated. Would PBT’s integrated contextual exegesis approach to the Scriptures be too sophisticated for that audience? Do I use words in my vocabulary that they might not understand?

The Wisdom of Others I sought out a pastor with prison teaching experience. His advice was 1) keep your message simple because inmates don’t get many chances to use their minds in prison and 2) be sure to bring/give them hope. I knew that many of my favorite Lukan passages were filled with hope, so that part seemed doable. But one thing I have learned is that context usually makes Bible passages deeper and richer in their implications and applications, not necessarily simpler.

Amber Waves of Grain It is 350 miles from Denver due east to Ellsworth, Kansas. And that is 350 miles of flat land! Once we got to Western Kansas, everything was both level and green as far as the eye could see. In early June the grain fields were on the verge of starting to ripen. As the winds blew, the stalks and heads of grain swayed back and forth rhythmically, which brought to life that “*O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain*” opening line from *American the Beautiful*. The only thing that punctuated the seemingly endless expanse of farm land was a never ending string of grain elevators standing like sentinels over the prairie. Most were surrounded by small towns of roughly 100 houses, and all were connected by the Union Pacific rail line. It was the Great Prairie’s version of a string of pearls!

Prison Context At first glance the Ellsworth Correctional Facility (ECF) looks like what you would expect a low-to-medium security prison to look like - functionally looking concrete buildings lined with rows of narrow windows, all surrounded by concentric rings of cyclone fencing topped by razor wire. There is the requisite entry building where security checks are made and all bags and visitor badges are screened. Then there is the double-locking door progression that separates the outside world from the interior world of the prison.

We didn’t know it, but we had been brought to a special prison environment. The first evidence of that was the placement of the Spiritual Life Center (SLC), a twelve-sided structure with a peaked roof prominently residing in the middle of the prison campus with sidewalks radiating out from the SLC in all directions to all of the cell blocks. Remarkably, this chapel was built (an architect donated the design) over a period of years totally with volunteer labor and materials financed by gifts totaling a third of a million dollars. Over the years, this prison has been blessed with wardens who encouraged the development of the spiritual side of their residents and, as part of that philosophy, allowed the ECF prison chaplains to creatively minister to the inmates in meaningful ways. We would increasingly realize we had been brought to a special place, a spiritual sanctuary if you will.

Initial Exposure Chaplain Herbie greeted us as we migrated through entry security and escorted us to the SLC. As we entered the front doors of this chapel sanctuary, we discovered the drama team was practicing for an upcoming worship service and the seminar setup crew was already at work getting ready for the evening's first "Bible Alive" session. Everything and everyone stopped when we entered the SLC and most inmates made a beeline for David and me. It's as if they couldn't wait to greet us, shake our hand, look us in the eye and tell us how grateful they were that we had come. In greeting me, most of them expressed surprise at how tall I am (6'6"). "You didn't look nearly as tall on those DVDs" was their nearly universal response. We all laughed. In a matter of minutes, we felt welcomed and very much at home.

Can I Ask a Question? As I was setting up the electronics on the dais, a slightly-built, Afro-American young man approached me and wondered if he could ask me a question. He wanted to know if John the Baptist had been raised by the Essene community. A great question and one I had a pretty good answer for him from my research on *Zechariah and Elizabeth*. Well, that led to an interesting follow-on discussion. That was my first clue that some in this audience might be a lot more biblically savvy than those "keep it simple" cautions and concerns warranted.

Shortly thereafter, another young man approached me and wanted to talk about John 15. He had seen my DVD contextual teaching on John 15:2 and the mistranslation of the Greek verb *airo* in that verse. Based on that, he decided to examine all the Greek verbs of John 15 and had written a paper on those verbs. He wondered if I might be interested in reading it. That interchange was sufficient to put to rest any remaining concerns about "keep it simple." I felt released to just "be me" in my teaching style and content. I subsequently learned that a number of these brothers had viewed all the DVDs/tapes in Ray VanderLaan's "*That the World May Know*" series. Ironically, I began to realize that this may be one of the better informed audiences I've had the privilege to teach! With those two opening questions, God seemed to make sure I was going to feel comfortable just being me in this setting.

Taking a Tour Setting up the A/V equipment in the SLC and interacting with the inmates made me feel like I was in my typical environment setting up for another contextual immersion experience in a church setting. However, that was shortly to change as Chaplain Herbie next took us on a tour of POD 3 (Cell Block 3) after our setup was complete. There we saw the rows of narrow cells, prisoner's playing cards on breakout tables, the isolation and solitary confinement modules, and the guards exercising constant surveillance over everything. There was no air conditioning in the cell block even though it was 101 degrees outside. State law says that as long as they can keep the inside temperature below 90 degrees (which they can with fans), A/C does not need to be provided. It was humbling for me to realize that some of those prisoners that I was now observing might well be in the SLC Chapel later that night to hear about a Jesus that they may have never been exposed to. There was also something exciting about that thought!

A Bite to Eat We finished the POD 3 tour about 4:15 PM and had some time before the worship team would be kicking off the first evening's session at 5:30 PM. So Chaplain Herbie asked us if we would like to get something to eat in town before the seminar began. So off to main street Ellsworth (two blocks long) we headed. There was only one eating option – a throwback 1950's genre "Café" where a quarter-pound cheeseburger and fries is still \$2.25! Herbie told us that in the Old West, Ellsworth was one of the toughest, roughest cattle-drive towns of the Great Plains. Somehow that suggested that Ellsworth was an appropriate place for a prison!

The Importance of Hope I had heard from our host Chris, who helps facilitate the Sunday evening worship service at the prison, that Chaplain Herbie was a ex-con from Leavenworth having done several years there for drug trafficking. Naturally that peaked my interest in how God took him from being a Delta flight attendant running drugs between airports to a prison chaplain. So as we ate, I began to ask Herbie questions about his journey, his current post, his hopes, dreams, frustrations, etc. I don't think it was my questions but the Holy Spirit's touch that caused Herbie to start to open up, share his story (and break down) like never before – at least that is what our host Chris told us later. He has known Herbie for years and had never seen nor heard that side of him. As Herbie opened up his life, and the personal tragedies, desperations, and triumphs in God's Grace that marked his journey, I sensed the importance of "hope" in an inmate's life more clearly than ever before. That glimpse helped to shape the tone and emphasis of the passages I would be sharing with the inmates over the next two evenings.

Getting Started At 5:30 PM the Praise and Worship Team started playing and the first inmates started filing into the SLC, all uniformly dressed in blue. I was taken aback at how good the music team was. But then, professional musicians get involved with drugs and then get seduced into trafficking and, as a result, become residents in places like the ECF.

We could not have anticipated it, but our seminar on this particular Thursday evening was going head-to-head with both the opening game of the Laker-Celtics championship series as well a prison softball tournament. Despite those appealing options, 110 inmates (50% Caucasian, 40% Afro-American and 10% Hispanic) chose to come to our opening “Bible Alive” session. Most carried with them thick study Bibles! As each inmate entered the SLC, David handed them a complimentary copy of my ***Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God*** book along with a 24-page handout of notes and graphics that I would be using throughout the “Bible Alive” seminar. Again, the inmates expressed appreciation and thanks that we had come to be with them.

I knew we were in for a special evening when the opener of a 40-minute praise and worship set by the prison praise band was the chorus from Steven Curtis Chapman’s song “Free.” The first of several paradoxical contrasts! These inmates exhibited such enthusiasm, excitement and energy for worship! Their joyful hearts and evident joyful countenances would humble most of those attending our typical church worship services! You quickly got the sense that for many in this prison setting, worship was truly the highlight of their week. In interacting with the inmates, it dawns on you after a while that no one seems to be bitter about their status! The Lord’s Joy always trumps bitterness!

After a particularly meaningful lyric, one inmate would shout out *God is good!* And all the other brothers would respond (loudly!) *All the time!* This would prompt the instigating inmate to shout out as a sequel: *All the time!* Which caused all the other brothers to shout out: *God is good!* This well-understood response format would then end with thunderous applause and foot stomping. It was my first realization that “proper” church worship decorum is not a big deal in prison! Passionate response is! And that just served to magnify God’s Glory.

I started the first evening’s teaching as I usually do – with a rationale as to why context matters when we come to the Bible. I took a few minutes to tell them why we had given them a copy of ***Zechariah and Elizabeth***. How that couple’s story is a universal story of two people whose life just didn’t turn out like they hoped and dream it would. So how do you keep on keeping on when life just doesn’t go in the directions we wanted? That’s the thrust of the book and a theme I thought they could relate to. Then I went into a module of biblical geography. Several could not get over that the Sea of Galilee is really just a big lake! Then I did some vignette teaching taking several “familiar” passages, e.g. the real birth of Jesus, and show how understanding the context really opens those passages up to things we hadn’t previously seen in the text.

After 75 minutes it was time for the first break. It was then that I realized I was going to wear out my arm signing autographs in the inside front cover of my ***Zechariah and Elizabeth*** book as a goodly number of inmates started to line up at my teaching stool to ask me to sign their book. Since I wanted to do more than just sign my name, I wrote long sentences (as anyone who edits my writing knows, I am partial to long sentences!) containing both comfort and challenge for each person. Normally, with these 15-minute breaks I can reset the DVDs, PowerPoint modules, etc., and get ready for the next teaching session. But this night I would be writing and signing during the entire break times. It was a privilege to be able to do that.

Frameworks and Tools At the beginning of the second session, I told the brothers that a number of people had contributed the finances for us to come, allowing us to give them each a book and to set up a context corner in the SLC Library, etc., I also told them I wanted to say each of their names out loud (first name only) to recognize their special contribution to these two evenings, and in so doing to make them an active part of the seminar. After I finished reading the list of each of their names, the inmates collectively rose and gave those people a standing ovation! Immediately thereafter, some of the inmates began to work on creating “Thank You” cards for each contributor. Such appreciative hearts!

For the second session on Thursday night, I flew them around Israel with our DVDs, taught them *remez*, and then developed our central framework – “*The Five Story Lines of Scripture*.” When I developed the “Human Condition” with its “Bermuda Triangle of the Soul” issues of abandonment, humiliation and rejection, it was clear from the focus and intensity of their faces that they were all on board – they knew those realities. As we ended our first evening, more brothers lined up to have me write in the inside cover of ***Zechariah and Elizabeth*** and to again express appreciation for the evening’s teaching.

An Altar Call? As we were making our one-hour commute from Ellsworth back to Hays, Kansas where Chris, our host lived and where we bunking in, we discussed the dynamics of this first evening. One of the realizations I had as we were driving back was that I had not had the thought for even one moment that evening that I was with felons in prison. They just seemed like any other brothers in Christ, albeit more enthusiastic and appreciative!

As we were driving home, Chris asked me if I had ever done an “altar call” at the end of a “Bible Alive” seminar (I had not). His sense was that there were inmates in the audience who were really tracking with the content in both a mind and heart way. He wondered if it would be appropriate to actually have an invitation to give your life to Christ at the end of tomorrow night’s teaching time. That thought was going to make my night’s sleep a restless one. Was that God’s Spirit prompting me in another way as to how to be a good steward of this very unusual teaching situation?

Evening Two Our second evening started much like the first evening. Many inmates again stopped by as they filed into the SLC to tell us how much they appreciated our being there and how much they valued the first evening’s teaching. Once again the Praise and Worship Team kicked off this evening with a 30-minute set.

As I opened up this second evening, I asked for feedback about how they had received the first evening’s teaching, e.g., how it struck them, what impacted them, etc. It was thrilling and God-honoring to listen to their responses, e.g.

- One inmate said he was so struck by seeing the “shame motif” in the birth of Jesus that he called home to his Mom and described it to her. Then they both cried on the phone for five minutes. I’m not sure what that all meant, but it was clear something deep inside both of them had been touched.
- One grizzled, elderly Afro-American man stood and said, “Mr. Doug, you lit a fire in my heart last night.”
- Another volunteered that he came expecting a meal and ended up getting a Thanksgiving feast!
- One middle-age man observed that “I rediscovered the Bible in three hours last night.”
- Other words that we heard were...
 - *“I am so thankful to be here...Your being here is an answer to our prayers.”*
 - *“You brought us a new way of looking at Scriptures...Thank you Holy Spirit.”*
 - *“Bible Alive is an understatement!”*

Energized for Evening Two! Needless to say, I pointed my index finger toward heaven to help us remember where our thanks truly needs to be directed. At the same time, I was excited about what this evening had in store. Now we would be jumping into passages that I knew would really speak to them, perhaps more powerfully than any audience I had yet been privileged to speak to. So into Luke 5 we went.

I started with Simon and the issues he had with Jesus’ command (because of his linen fishing nets) to go back out and fish during the day. As part of that I had to develop what it meant to be a disciple in that culture and how Simon didn’t measure up in the religious training system of his day – wasn’t worthy to be a disciple of a respected rabbi. And how the most shocking part of that story was that Jesus actually called Simon to become His disciple (they could all relate to being someone who did not measure up).

Next was opening up the encounter of Jesus with the leper. As I developed what it meant to be a leper in that first-century culture, they could immediately see the parallels in their own lives. They knew what it was like to be “unclean,” to be rejected and humiliated, to be on the outside looking in, and what it was like for a season to feel like you had absolutely no hope. And then experiencing the joy of being set free by the restorative touch of Jesus.

These emotions peaked when I began to develop the calling of Levi (in context of course!) by becoming Levi in the first person. As I told “my story” of the worst decision I ever made, i.e., to become a port tax collector in Capernaum, and how that led me to a “no hope” life, I could read in their faces that they knew what it was like to having made an incredibly bad decision and to feel like hope (and life) had forever passed you by. And then to experience the surprising, compassionate, life-restoring invitation of Jesus to “Follow Me.”

Responding to Jesus As these encounters unfolded, I could sense in their faces and in their tears that some type of “invitation” was appropriate. Never having done one, I didn’t have any template of how to go about that. So I just went with the flow of where we had been in the Scriptures. I said to the inmates that encountering Scripture always calls for a response. Encountering God’s Word is sometimes a challenge, sometimes a comfort, sometimes an invitation, and sometimes all three. But a response is called for. That tonight I had a sense that some had seen Jesus like never before. That God’s Spirit was nudging some to realize their desperate need for a Savior and their need to repent, to let Jesus atone for their sins, and to be adopted into His family. Actually I said more than that, but can’t really recall all that came forth. Then I asked for those who wanted to make that decision tonight to simply raise their hands. I was stunned to see a dozen hands immediately go in the air.

Leaving a Library Behind Long before we arrived, I felt it would be a good idea to leave a collection of Bible-in-Context resources behind in the SLC’s library for the inmates to use. With the financial gifts that were contributed, I was able to buy some 30+ of my favorite contextual resources from Amazon and donate them to the SLC. I gave priority to those resources which were highly visual, yet still had good solid contextual context. At the end of the second evening’s teaching, I called Chaplain Herbie up and presented him with those three boxes of contextual resources that could carry on the contextual teaching they have experienced during “Bible Alive” after I left. Again, the brothers rose for another standing ovation of appreciation.

As I closed our time together by expressing our appreciation for being able to come and teach, and ended with our traditional “Shalom, Shalom” closing, the inmates rose one more time for another standing ovation. Again I pointed heavenward and asked Chaplain Herbie to close the evening in prayer. Afterward, more inmates came forward to have me write in their *Zechariah and Elizabeth* books, others came to express personal thanks, and still others came to request prayer. And so our final 15-minutes (the guards were kind enough not to force us to vacate the SLC at the 9:00 PM closing time) were spent laying on of hands and praying for those prisoners who requested prayer. You realize again what a special privilege it is to pray over those who so longingly want to be prayed over.

Reflections In trying to write this trip report, I realize how inadequate words are to convey the emotional and spiritual realities we experienced. That old phrase, “you had to have been there” certainly seems appropriate. Experiences like this profoundly affect you, yet you are hard pressed to put your finger on all the reasons why. Even month later, I was still searching for words to adequately communicate what that experience was like and still trying to identify how all this has impacted me. Some of those thoughts would include:

- We went to the ELC to minister to them. But in the end, I think they far more ministered to us about joy, a passion for God’s Word, enthusiasm for worship, transparency in relationships, etc.
- A number of the inmates said that they had to go to prison to become truly “free.” Not my paradigm of how that happens!
- How easy it is to become constrained by our paradigms, particularly our paradigms of what we think constitutes appropriate worship.
- Who would have thought that by going to a prison worship/teaching experience you actually get some great insights as to what the Kingdom of God is meant to be like? Which raises the issue: Want to re-energize your church with joy and a passion for worship? Then consider adopting a prison as part of your Body Life strategy and let the brothers and sisters in prison minister to you.
- A friend wrote down some one word descriptors of how the brothers responded to our two evenings together...*joyful, worshipful, open, eager, learners, attentive, peaceful, responsive, gracious, sincere, no pretense, thankful*. Would that describe Sunday morning at your church?

Final Thoughts What a joy it was to be able to open up God’s Word (in context!) with these inmates. I trust that somehow God’s Spirit will bless you through this trip report and give you a sense of what it was like to be there with us.

Shalom, Shalom *Doug* for the PBT Team