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Because Context Matters

Ministry Glimpse: The Leaven in Leavenworth

Every prison teaching experience is unique. Wardens differ in their receptivity. Chaplains differ in their approach and impact. The amount of “leaven in the loaf” of each prison is different. Audiovisual capabilities vastly differ. But one thing remains the same. When those gates close, you never know what surprises await you, and what adjustments you often suddenly have to make; but the Lord does. This visit was no exception!

I never intended to bring “Bible Alive” to Leavenworth Penitentiary (the “Pen” as the locals refer to it). But last January in God’s Providence I was invited to bring “Bible Alive” to the Lansing, Kansas State Prison (west of Kansas City). I presented sessions the first day at the medium security prison and the following day at the minimum security complex. After we ended the second seminar around 3:30 PM, my host, a local person who mentors inmates in Kansas prisons, asked if I would like to run up to Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary (about 10 miles north of Lansing) and see if we could speak to the chaplain and tell him about “Bible Alive.” So I said, “Let’s do it!” Even if we couldn’t connect with the chaplain, at least I would see this historic Federal prison (Michael Vick was the most recent well-known inmate). So off we went.

From some distance away, the impressive front of the Leavenworth Penitentiary, home for 1800 inmates, can be seen. The facade reminded me of some of the Federal buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue here in Washington, DC.



Fortunately we were able to meet with Chaplain Mike for a few minutes. When I asked him about doing a weekend seminar at the Prison, I learned that it would be difficult, especially to schedule on a weekend the 4-5 hour block of time I usually need. However, He did say that it would be much easier to do something during the week. As we left, I gave him one of our *"The Bible and the Land"* aerial DVDs and some information about "Bible Alive." Leaving that DVD behind would turn out to be providential! Thank you Holy Spirit!

In God's Providence, three months later I received an invitation from two Kansas City area Community Bible Study classes inquiring whether I would be their fall retreat speaker. They wanted to dig into "Making Disciples Jesus' Way." That invitation afforded the possibility of going back to Kansas City to teach at Leavenworth. I reconnected with Chaplain Mike who thought he could arrange something for two hours on a Thursday afternoon as well as in the evening. So we put it on the calendar.

In late summer I began inquiring about the logistics of bringing *"Bible Alive"* to Leavenworth. I progressively found out that

- I could not bring my laptop into the "Pen." That was significant since I use 12 image intensive PowerPoint's during "Bible Alive."
- Nor could those PowerPoint files be carried in on my flash drive.
- Nor could I bring in any of our "Above Israel" DVDs to use during the seminar. So I asked Chaplain Mike if I could make use of *"The Bible and the Land"* DVD I had previously left with him. He said I could. That would give me some aerial video of Israel to work with during the teaching.
- I could ship in books as gifts for the inmates as well as resources for the Prison's library, but the total value had to be under \$240. (I was planning on more than ten times that amount of resources!) If the shipments were declared to be in excess of \$240 in value, a written request had to be submitted to the Federal Bureau of Prisons in Washington, DC, for authorization to accept (and use), which typically takes a year!
- I would be permitted to email into the "Pen" one PowerPoint (PPT) presentation not to exceed 15 MB in size. Each one of the dozens of photographic images I used in my PPT's is between 2-3 MB! That means I would be limited to one PPT with no more than five images in it! Clearly that was going to constrain my usual way of sharing the "Bible Alive" multimedia material!

Those impediments meant it was time for Kingdom creativity! I asked Chaplain Mike what if 10 different entities (people/organizations) sent in 10 different shipments of resources and books each of which did not exceed \$239 in value? Mike said that would be fine. Also, what if I declared the value of my books at cost, not retail? Turns out that's acceptable in the Federal Bureau of Prison system since the provider declares the value. So that's what we did: Declared the value of the books at cost and then shipped them in different boxes under different names - PBT's name, Bible-in-Context Ministries name (my personal ministry), my wife's name, my name, etc.

I also had to remove all the photographic images of Israel from my 12 "Bible Alive" PPT's leaving only alpha-numeric slides in the database. Then I consolidated those PPT files into one file under the 15 MB limit. One week before arriving in Kansas, I emailed this stripped down PPT file to the technology person at the prison. By now you are probably getting the picture – nothing worked as I assumed it would! For some reason that email could never get through to the Prison email inbox. So we needed another last-minute approach. Because of this glitch, I was granted permission to carry in one DVD with that compressed *"Bible Alive"* PPT file on it. Unlike the State prison experiences where you can carry in just about anything of an A/V nature, the Federal Bureau of Prisons is a different world!

David Weatherby, a good friend and President of the PBT Board, traveled with me to Leavenworth. We arrived at the prison Visitor's Center for initial processing at Noon so we would have time to set up before starting at 1:00 PM. Chaplain Mike met us at 12:30 PM and brought us to the front entrance of the Prison where we were processed a second time. On the way to the Chapel, he told us to plan for about 25 inmates – the number in his weekly Bible Study. He also told us that he had not had time to process the paperwork for the boxes of handout books and prison library resources I shipped in. So I would need to explain to him later what books each inmate would be receiving and what resource books would soon be in the Prison library thanks to PBT's "Prison Trip Patrons."

As we entered the chapel, I went up to the front and suddenly realized there was no computer to work with. It's now 12:45 PM. Some of the inmates were already in the Chapel awaiting the seminar and overheard Chaplain Mike telling us there are no Prison computers that we would be able to use. One of the inmates suggested that there was a Christian ministry in another part of the prison that did have a laptop and maybe they would lend it to us. A couple of phone calls later and we had that computer in the chapel at 12:55 PM.

No inmate is ever allowed to touch a computer. That is a Prison prohibition we did not know about. At 12:55 PM we were short on time, so two inmates, apparently very familiar with the Chapel's A/V system, offered to quickly interface the borrowed computer with the Chapel's projection system. Unfortunately one of the guards walked into the Chapel at that moment and saw those two inmates helping with the computer. Now we had an incident on our hands just as we were about to kickoff at 1:00 PM! As other officials were summoned, Chaplain Mike intervened as best he could to keep the computer in the Chapel as well as shield these two inmates (one of whom was a Muslim) from any disciplinary action. We overheard his appeal to the officers that went like this: *"These two men came all the way from Washington, DC, to bring a very special presentation to the inmates. We can't just shut them down!"* We were going to hear this appeal again before the afternoon ended. Fortunately a decision was made not to take any action. So we started "Bible Alive" with about 50 inmates in the pews – twice what Chaplain Mike expected.

A minute later another surprise surfaced. Since we were not allowed to download my one PPT presentation from the DVD to the hard drive of the borrowed computer, the computer had to read the PowerPoint directly from the DVD port. I soon learned this is a much slower frame-to-frame transfer process resulting in a several second delay in getting the next frame on the screen. That changed my "pace" in terms of syncing my spoken words with the appropriate images on the screen. No big deal; just another wrinkle!

As we were about to start, something else became evident - the computer did not come with a remote mouse that would allow me to control the progression of the PPT images as I spoke. Nor was the VGA cable long enough to allow the laptop to be close enough to the lectern so I could personally advance each frame. And since no inmate is allowed (in theory anyway) to touch a computer, I suddenly had to press David into service. He sat about six feet from me with the computer in his lap and manually hit the advance arrow on the computer whenever I nodded my head for the next slide. I also had to readjust my presentation mode to try and nod my head five seconds before I wanted the next frame on the screen! Being the Board President of Preserving Bible Times did not keep David from now being the "prison mouse." If you are associated with PBT, you better have a servant's heart! All of which points out yet again that it's always good to have a traveling companion on these prison trips who can quickly provide another pair of hands when needed (There's are reasons that the Lord sent his disciples out 2X2!)

Unbeknownst to us, the person in the Christian ministry who had just lent us his computer an hour before had a sudden change in plans and now would be leaving the Prison before the afternoon session ended. Furthermore, he would not be coming back to the Prison that evening. As a result he showed up at the Chapel during the 2:00 PM stretch break and wanted his computer back NOW! Obviously, this would severely impact the rest of my presentation! This latest issue created a sudden flurry of activity. Chaplain Mike quickly contacted the Warden's Office and explained the situation. This is the second time the plea to continue was made because of these two

men who came “all the way” from Washington, DC, etc. As a result, the Warden intervened and we were able to retain the computer and keep “Bible Alive” alive!

This intervention peeked the Warden’s curiosity about what was going on in the Chapel. He was told that “Bible Alive” was here, that inmates were being flown over the Holy Land with our Israel DVD; they were studying the Bible in context, etc. As a result, the Warden asked if he could see that DVD later as well as take it home and show it to his family! That prompted me to tell Chaplain Mike that I would send him the complete set of four “Above Israel” DVDs when I got back home for the Warden (and his family?) to see before placing them in the Prison library. All of this put another smile on my face - situation under heavenly control! When we finished the first session at 3:00 PM, many of the inmates came forward to say how much they enjoyed the presentation, how intriguing it was, and that they would certainly be returning for the evening session. As David and I left the Pen around 3:15 PM, it was with a reaffirming sense that once again the Lord provides what you need just when you need it!

Since we had a couple of hours to fill before we needed to be back for the evening session, we decided to check out the town of Leavenworth which is situated on a bluff overlooking the “Mighty Missouri.” The mercantile part of Leavenworth is probably six blocks by four blocks, which we quickly covered. We found the old Sante Fe railroad station and on Sixth Street we found Sis’ Cookie Café. Since we had a light lunch before going to the Prison at Noon (a Coney dog from Sonic), we were looking for a late afternoon snack. So into Sis’s we went. If ever there is a down-home, local café with memorabilia and paraphernalia plastered on almost every conceivable wall space, Sis’ is the real thing! So we ordered our tea and coffee with a couple of cookies and sat down to rest and reflect.

As I scanned the cafe walls, I noticed dozens of items with a Kansas Jay Hawk theme, including many KU basketball team pictures through the years. Since David and I were her only customers, we struck up a conversation with Sis. Eventually I told her that I played basketball for the University of Michigan and that I played in the 1964 Final Four right down the road in Kansas City. Well, you would have thought that Labron James had just shown up! She got excited, grabbed a menu and had me sign it with my basketball number and year. To the best of my memory, that is the only basketball autograph I have ever been asked for! There wasn’t one square foot of wall space left in the café that I could see where she might place it, so maybe my signed menu is probably somewhere on a wall in the men’s bathroom of a small café on Sixth Street in Leavenworth, KS. The whole thing was a mid-America hoot! After a brief visit to the Buffalo Soldier Memorial at historic Fort Leavenworth (just down the road from the Pen), we returned to the prison.

Our surprises were not over. At 6:00 PM when we should have started the two-hour evening session, there were only a few inmates in the Chapel. As I was about to ponder how in the world I could have turned off so many inmates with “Bible Alive,” we learned that the Prison had a special dinner for inmates that evening which significantly lengthened the dinner hour (four seatings). The best guess was that it would be at least 6:45 PM before most prisoners could get back to the Chapel. So we spent half an hour talking with 6-8 brothers in the back of the Chapel about what it was like being a follower of Jesus in Leavenworth. That was eye-opening and part of the Lord’s intentional delay.

Turns out that of the 1800 inmates in the Pen, about 100 attend Chapel on Sunday morning. Of that 100, about 25 consistently attend a weekly Bible study hosted by the Chaplain. When we asked why there was a falloff from Sunday morning attendance to Bible study participation, the answer we heard was that the other 75 inmates felt that if you go to church on Sunday you are a Christian and don’t need to do anything else. Of those 25 who are Bible study regulars, about a dozen are hard core Christians who call themselves the “Soul Patrol.” They walk the Prison hallways and the Prison Yard praying for the Prison, the guards, the staff, as well as individual prisoners. They are the leaven in the loaf at Leavenworth and we had them with us for both “Bible Alive” sessions.

We also learned that being a Christian in prison is not easy. You definitely are in the minority, and there is active persecution, ridicule and forms of harassment directed at any inmate who tries to change their behavior to be more Christ like. Furthermore, there are no places in prison to hide from that kind of persecution. We also learned (again) that inmates have significant blocks of free time, e.g., five hours a day, to study the Bible. As we learned in previous prison teaching visits, inmates come to Christ while in prison. "I had to go to prison to be set free" is a theme frequently heard. Getting sound mentoring for these new believers is a real challenge, which is why we run across "new" believers who tend to go off on spiritual tangents.

When we were at the Lansing State Correctional Facility in January, I interacted with some new believers who were deep into numerology, others deep into prophecy or end-times theology. When these brothers would approach me during the "Bible Alive" breaks for advice on good resources that I could recommend they read in those areas, my advice to them was simple: spend the next three years studying and falling more deeply in love with Jesus before deciding what to pursue next. One reason we like to put a collection of proven contextual resources in prison libraries is to (hopefully) channel this desire to dig deeper into studying "first things first." If someone wants to get preoccupied with biblical context, I am much more comfortable with them doing that than going off the deep end on some of these other issues. I think that is part of how we get used as leaven in the loaf at these institutions. Having the Spirit get inmates exposed and excited about biblical context prompts them to dig into the books and library resources we leave behind.

At 6:45 PM we now had more inmates in the pew for the evening session than when we started in the afternoon! That really surprised Chaplain Mike. We were allowed to extend the seminar time until 8:15 PM. In the 90 minutes left, I contextually took the inmates through the Luke 5 encounters with Jesus – Simon, the leper and Levi.

- 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 I opened 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 having made an incredibly bad decision and to feel that hope (and life) had forever passed them by. And then to experience the surprising, compassionate, life-restoring invitation of Jesus to "Follow Me."

Once again I sensed how these passages connect with the reality of their lives. And once again I was grateful for the work of the Spirit bringing these passages alive in new ways for these inmates.

When we closed at 8:15 PM, no one wanted to leave. Almost to a man, each of the inmates lined up in the center aisle to thank me for coming and to express something that was meaningful to them. They so much wanted to shake my hand, look me in the eye and say something personal. It was an honor and a privilege to stand in that

“receiving” line to affirm their personhoods and extend them dignity. Were it not for their khaki prison clothes, there was no sense they are prisoners. They are brothers in Christ or those who came to consider His claim on their life.

As we left, Chaplain Mike expressed his gratitude for our coming. He made repeated references to the quality of the content of the presentations. I think he was pleasantly surprised! As David and I left the Pen around 8:30 PM, Chaplain Mike told us about a restaurant across the street from the Pen that we might consider for our dinner. So that’s what we did. We both ordered a Kansas City strip steak dinner (seemed appropriate and the \$14.95 price was right) to celebrate the Lord’s goodness to us in smoothing out all the surprises we encountered in our day and to ask his anointing on what had happened and been taught.

The following Monday morning I received an email from Chaplain Mike. He had already been to the mail room, had retrieved the ten boxes of books and was filling out the paperwork for the Warden’s approval. Ten days later I received another email from him telling me that the Warden had signed all the paperwork and that he would start distributing my two books to the inmates that afternoon and would be putting the contextual resources in the library.

Some things you might wish to reflect upon in the months ahead...

- Pray for those dozen brothers in the “Soul Patrol” that their numbers would grow, their impact expands and that the Lord would encourage, embolden and protect them as they continue to be the leaven in Leavenworth.
- For Chaplain Mike as he continues to minister in that world.
- For “Bible Alive” Gospel seeds to have been planted and for those seeds to sprout and ripen into fruit.
- Praise Him for the way He prepares the way and protects that way when we follow His initiative in ministering to others.
- That there will be inmates who decide to “dig deeper” into biblical context by using the new library resources.
- That each inmate who receives a copy of “*Zechariah and Elizabeth*” and “*Becoming a Judean Shepherd*” will be touched (encouraged, healed, embolden) in transforming ways.

As we look ahead, we have been asked to return to Wichita, KS, by four churches on Palm Sunday weekend next year to bring PBT’s “*The Last Days of Jesus: The Greatest Story Never Told*” devotional seminar to them. That will put us in within an hour of two more Kansas state prisons – El Dorado and Hutchinson. The “Hutch” is an intriguing possibility. Supposedly it is the toughest, roughest prison in the Kansas State system. Some refer to it as the “Gladiator School” meaning you better be a gladiator if you want to survive that experience. We’ll see what the Lord has in store.

I hope this “trip report” was helpful in giving you a sense of what our late September Thursday was like in Leavenworth. Each one of these prison teaching experiences is a one-of-a-kind. If you would like to help underwrite future prison teaching trips as a “PBT Prison Patron,” you can use the DONATE button on the www.preservingbibletimes.org website or send your check to PBT, POB 83357, Gaithersburg, MD 20883. Denote “Prison Fund” should you feel led to participate with us.

Shalom, Shalom

Doug for the Preserving Bible Times Team