

But for the Grace of God

Jake Dykstra

Roughly 100 of them stared back at us in that old, hot chapel at the Indiana State Prison. Their faces each told a story, a sobering story that was a mystery to the beholders. The thought crossed my mind as I looked out over the crowd, “How many of these faces were the last thing that someone saw before they took their last breath? How many of these men have brought about the end of someone’s life, innocence, or livelihood?” I can say without a doubt that I am glad I don’t know all of the things that the men who came to hear the Hope Heralds sing had done. There we all were, awaiting an hour of praise to God’s name. The people in that chapel could not have been from more opposite walks of life. Yet there in the back of the chapel was the phrase that brought the two groups together: “But for the grace of God.”

Thirty-five of the Hope Heralds arrived at the prison after a two-hour bus ride. I dare say that many of them shared my thoughts of thankfulness that we would be returning to that bus to go home after a few hours. For most who arrive there, they can know that they have arrived at their inevitable and inescapable coffin. Indiana State Prison is a very large compound with impregnable walls, housing about 2,300 inmates. The average sentence to be served is 55 years. Since it is a maximum security facility with many of the state’s most dangerous criminals, we had to go through a grueling process to get in. To enter the prison, we had to present identification, go through a metal detector, be frisked, and then proceed through a series of about six rooms. One cast iron door would open, let a group in, slam shut, and then another door would let them into the next room after a short wait. It was peculiar that after all the hassle to make it to the chapel, we never saw a single guard, even while we were with the inmates! We found that it was a significantly more intimidating environment than the rest home concerts that we are accustomed to.

“Is there a Jake Dykstra here?” This was one of the first things that I heard as I walked through the door of the prison chapel. I knew who was asking, and as soon as I looked, there he was. The man who I had talked to a full two years ago at the last Hope Heralds concert at the prison. His name is not important, but his story is. This man had committed a sin that any Christian would look upon as detestable and ugly, and for that he is serving out two life sentences without chance of parole. We talked for a while, and one thing struck me: all this guy wanted to talk about was God, Jesus Christ, and salvation! He visually thirsted for good Christian fellowship and was so happy to have us back to hear us sing and to talk to us.

It was a truly blessed experience to be able to sing to and have fellowship with the men there. More than likely, some of them were there on good behavior, simply looking to break up their daily routine and get out of their cells. But we could not miss the fact that this was not the case with all of them. Many of the inmates sang along, faces alive with the joy of singing praise to God. In fact, one old man requested to join us on one of our numbers that he knows and loves. The song itself speaks about the Christian’s hope of eternal life in the mansions that Christ has prepared for us in heaven. This man loves that message, for that is all he has. He knows that he is going to die in that prison, yet has the hope of eternal life. The men particularly liked the song

“Little is Much When God is in It,” performed by the Voices of Victory. How relatable this song is to them, in their tiny cells in ten acres they will never leave. They have many opportunities to serve the Lord there, as many of them made clear to us. Many of them are Bible study leaders, choir members, and even graduates of a Presbyterian seminary within the prison. While what they can do there may seem small in comparison to all of the opportunities that we have to serve, they are thankful for what they have.

It must not be ignored that these men certainly deserve the position that they have in life. These men were terrible criminals at one time or another and deserved the penalties they received in worldly courts. Nonetheless, this ought to give us cause for reflection. How easy isn't it for me to look in pride upon other people and think that I am really something? This was my first thought, and I am sure I was not alone. This is true for all of God's people, young and old. Pride is a sin that we love because by nature we love ourselves. We love to have others look at us and applaud our good works. Our sinful natures say that the men we traveled to minister to are the lowest of the low, certainly not worthy of anything but a miserable life in a jail cell.

Throughout the day, each of us singing saw more and more of ourselves in our brothers in Christ there. Don't you and I belong in that prison? Worse yet, don't you and I belong in eternal hell for even one sin against God? This thought ought to humble any of us to the dust. Let us be careful, as young people and adults that we do not vaunt ourselves over others. While there certainly are degrees of sin, some of them meriting serious punishment from society, the sins of God's people make each one equally worthy of damnation in God's courtroom. You and I must never look at the sins of others and think that our sins are not so bad. The next time your neighbor wrongs you or the next time you hear of a gross public sin, remember that he is no more deserving of eternal punishment than you are. “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

How wonderful it is that God's people may know his great grace. He does not choose us for who we are by nature, but for who we are in Christ. Recall the words of Ephesians 2:8, 9, “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” May our lives be a testimony of this truth, that but for the grace of God, we have no hope! But for the grace of God, we would hate him and his word. But for the grace of God, you and I could be sitting in that chapel staring back at the Hope Heralds. Thank God that he has chosen us for his elect children, and pray for the strength to put away the pride that so easily besets us day by day. By the work of the Spirit in our hearts, we may believe without a doubt the words of our Savior that his grace is sufficient for us.

Originally published in:

Vol. 77 No. 12 December 2018

