

“Prison Bars Can’t Stop Those Who Believe in Jesus!”

By Steve Ramer, Pastor

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Scriptures

Acts 16:19-39 (selected verses)

But when the slave owners saw that Paul had set her free they realized that any hope of making money off of her was gone. So they seized Paul and Silas and... When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city... and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, the citizens of the Empire, to observe." ...the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and... after they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely.... in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

But around about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas... saying, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe in Jesus, and you will be saved..."

When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." And the jailer reported the message to Paul... But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public... and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves." ...so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.

Sermon

On May 4, 1961, 13 riders (seven black and six white), left Washington, DC, on two buses to ride through Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, ending in New Orleans, Louisiana.

They called themselves, “Freedom Riders” and their goal was to test the 1946 Supreme court’s desegregation of interstate travel.

While only minor troubles were encountered on the first half of the route, on Mother's Day, in Anniston, Alabama, a mob of Klansmen, some still in church attire, attacked the first of the two buses.

When the driver tried to leave the station KKK members slashed its tires and forced the crippled bus to stop several miles outside of town where it was firebombed.

Reporters on the scene documented that as the bus burned, the mob held the doors shut, intending to burn the riders to death.

When the second bus reached Anniston, it was boarded by eight Klansmen who beat the Freedom Riders leaving them semi-conscious in the back of the bus.

And when that same bus managed to make it to Birmingham, it was attacked by another mob, this time aided and abetted by the police under the orders of Commissioner Bull Connor.

As the riders exited the bus, they were beaten with baseball bats, iron pipes and bicycle chains.

White Freedom Riders were singled out for especially frenzied beatings. James Peck required more than 50 stitches to wounds on his head

Peck was taken first to the Carraway Methodist Medical Center, where he was refused treatment!

But when reports reached the White House, US Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, urged the Freedom Riders to show more restraint and end their journey.

Finally, the governors of Alabama and Mississippi agreed with federal authorities to protect the riders, in exchange for being allowed to arrest them.

Surrounded by Highway Patrol and the National Guard, the buses arrived in Jackson, MS without incident, but the riders were immediately arrested.

But buses continued to arrive and once local jails were filled to overflowing around 300 Freedom Riders were transferred to the infamous Parchman State Penitentiary in northeast Mississippi.

Some were actually placed in the Maximum Security Unit which also contained "Death Row."

Others were forced to work on chain gangs.

Prison authorities also forced freedom riders to remove their clothing and undergo strip searches and the guards were relentless in trying to intimidate and humiliate the Freedom Riders.

But as in many previous jailing of Civil Rights prisoners, they began to enthusiastically sing Freedom Songs, and the prisoners sang these songs almost non-stop.

Of course, the white guards found this singing irritating and tried to stop it. One excuse offered was that it was bothering the cooks but considering that the cooks were all black we can be pretty sure that that was not likely the case.

Mattresses and bug screens were removed but the singing did not stop. Finally, after other attempts failed, the superintendent apologized to the riders and returned their belongings and mattresses.

Built in 1901, Parchman was originally one of two prisons designated for black men in segregated Mississippi.

Modeled after a slave plantation it's purpose was to extract free labor from inmates and the primary motivation for it's construction was to replace the abusive and corrupt convict lease system, which however still managed to survive in Mississippi up until WWII.

In 1905, its first year in full operation, the State of Mississippi earned \$185,000 (more than \$5 million today) from Parchman's operations.

In 1972, a federal judge found that Parchman had violated Constitutional protections against cruel and unusual punishment and stated that it was an affront to 'modern standards of decency'.

As a result, Mississippi was required to integrate the prison facilities, hire African-American staff members, abandon the for-profit farming system and hire trained penologists to head the prison.

But Parchman is once again garnering national headlines for all the wrong reasons.

Last week a 54-year-old inmate died at Parchman, the 16th prisoner since late December to perish in Mississippi's correctional facilities, where living conditions have been called inhumane

and which have been beset by murders, suicides, riots and escapes.

This most recent death comes less than a week after the Department of Justice announced launching an investigation into conditions at four Mississippi prisons, including Parchman.

DOJ officials said the investigation will focus on whether the Mississippi Department of Corrections adequately protects prisoners from physical harm by other prisoners "as well as whether there is adequate suicide prevention, including adequate mental health care and appropriate use of isolation, at Parchman."

But these recent deaths have also drawn attention to what lawmakers say are routine constitutional violations, as well as the chronic underfunding of a system that incarcerates people at a rate almost twice the American average.

In August 2018 the FBI was asked by the state to investigate the deaths of 15 inmates that occurred in the span of only one month.

In 2010 Unit #32 was shuttered as part of a settlement with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), after the group documented inhumane conditions including the use of permanent solitary confinement.

Unfortunately, following riots in early January, this unit was reopened and now houses hundreds of men.

"We have been treating these people like animals for decades," declared an attorney who works with inmates now housed at Unit 32, "Worse than animals, in fact." She then added!

In response to the January riots, hip hop artist Yo Gotti and music mogul Jay-Z are backing a federal lawsuit on behalf of 29 inmates claiming that their "lives are in peril" due to inhumane conditions and bare-bones staffing.

In a letter sent to state officials they claim that, "These deaths are a direct result of Mississippi's utter disregard for the people it has incarcerated and their constitutional rights."

In his first state-of-the-state address, in mid-January, the new governor of Mississippi announced his order to close another unit, #29 at Parchman prison.

The move comes more than seven months after a state health inspector produced a 154-page report, graphically documenting crumbling, unsanitary conditions in which prisoners lacked water, electricity and we're given spoiled food to eat.

Both the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in their appeal to the US Justice Department, requesting a federal investigation, alleged violation of constitutional rights, which safeguards against cruel and unusual punishment.

Brandon Jones, policy director for the Southern Poverty Law Center, says,

"For years we have known Parchman prison was a ticking time bomb. Time has run out. With more deaths... closing Parchman's Unit 29 is the first step in a number of actions the state needs to take to make our prisons safe and livable."

The DOJ appeal added this more ominous call to action, "It is no exaggeration to say more lives will be lost absent immediate intervention."

But rest assured MDC interim Commissioner, Tommy Taylor is on the case assuring the public on his first day on the job,

"We've got to be transparent. We're going to be fiscally responsible and we're going to be compassionate."

Somehow, I would just be glad if they focused on the last part first. But cynicism aside at least it is a small step in the right direction.

Of course, Parchman Farm and the state of Mississippi are mere tips of an iceberg of grave dysfunction that is occurring nationwide in our Prison Industrial complex.

From top to bottom, the criminal justice system, is first and foremost certainly criminal while simultaneously not at all just in how it treats the accused.

This is true right here in Larimer county where nearly 40% of inmates in the county lockup are incarcerated for the simple reason that they cannot afford to post bail that can be as low as \$100. Black men throughout the country we know are incarcerated and placed on death row at rates far disproportionate than are whites.

But the walls of Parchman are literally decaying and some of its most egregious cells are finally actually being closed!

So, yes, those who believe and who pray and who sing for justice and freedom can bring down prison walls to set the oppressed free!

Sometimes it can happen overnight, like it did for Paul and Silas.
While at other times it may take weeks of constant singing.

It may, in some cases take time, a whole lotta time, for the largest
and the strongest walls to finally crumble.

But they will!

But those voices praying and singing through the bars of Parchman,
or even the Larimer County Jail, must find ears on the outside.

One thing that I didn't mention about those Freedom Riders
was that it just so happened that they got their mattresses back
a day or so before a group of lawmakers from Minnesota
planned to visit Parchman.

Those on the outside heard their songs and it spurred many to action
and more and more Freedom Riders chose to get on buses.

Now change can feel painfully and frustratingly slow sometimes.
But we who believe in salvation, who believe in redemption,
freedom and justice cannot rest - we cannot rest until it is done!

Please check out these videos:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuZQkl09Jho>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jan/13/mississippi-prison-violence-inmates-parchman>
- <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/15/us/mississippi-parchman-prison-unsafe-inmates-moved/index.html>
- <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/22/us/mississippi-parchman-inmate-death-hanging/index.html>
- <https://abcnews.go.com/US/mississippi-governor-moves-close-notorious-prison-unit/story?id=68584004>
- <https://abcnews.go.com/US/16th-inmate-dies-troubled-mississippi-prison-system/story?id=68907638>

Steve Ramer

Pastor Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship
300 E. Oak St.
Ft. Collins, CO 80524
(970) 412-7510