Surviving Prison_ There is Hope

Diane: Imagine - you are accused of a crime, found guilty and sentenced to do time in prison. You will spend most of that time locked in a unit with people you probably do not know; people who have also broken the law or done terrible things; some worse than you can imagine. If you behave, it might be a bit easier for you but no doubt about it…being in prison is extremely difficult and it will affect your life for years to come, even after you are released.

Carol: Welcome to Women of Hope, this is Carol, and Tammy and I are here today with our friend Diane.

Tammy: Diane we are so happy to have you with us today and we are looking forward to sharing together about your experience....

Diane: Thank you.

Carol: OK Diane, here is the big question, have *you* been in prison?

Diane: Well, yes...and no! I have not been in prison for a crime I've committed. But I work in prisons to help prisoners cope with their life and to tell them about Jesus Christ.

Tammy: If you're listening from prison, you may find what Diane has to say very helpful. And if you have a family member in prison, you may learn about how to cope too. So stay with us.

Carol: Diane, tell us a little about prison life.

Diane: Well, if you want to survive in prison it's very important to *choose* to make the best of your situation – even though it will be very difficult.

Prison life has its very own subculture – one that is very different from life on the 'outside' and it can vary from prison to prison. If you want to survive your prison term, it is important to find out what that culture is and learn very quickly to get along as well as you can in that culture.

In many countries, prisoners are assessed to determine which prison will best meet their needs and the needs of their sentence. This includes things like their health, safety, the seriousness of their crime and also what they might need to spend their time doing while in prison.

Tammy: It must be very scary for a person who goes to prison for the first time. What happens?

Diane: The prisoner will usually be sent to a room where they will be strip-searched – that means

they have to take off their clothes to check whether they are hiding anything on themselves – and they will be given some prison clothing to put on. They will then be told how to live in their prison – how to look after their health and safety while they complete their sentence.

In many countries most prisoners are given the opportunity to attend an orientation session when they arrive at the prison. The prisoners are told about the rules of the prison. These rules are very important to listen to and quickly learn...they are for the safety of the prisoner.

Tammy: I'm sure that's very important.

Diane: Oh yes! The prisoner may then be told about what happens each day, and the programs and services that are available. There might be help available from professional people like nurses, doctors and psychologists or even a lawyer. And they may be able to have visits from family members.

If you're in prison and you want to have outside visitors, be sure to obey the rules...and fill out the necessary application forms.

Being in prison is *not* a good experience and you might be forced to do things you do not *want* to do... So do your best to keep a positive attitude, mind your own business, and cooperate with prison officers and staff. This may help make your prison term easier. If you don't follow the rules, you might be forced to stay in prison longer, or worse, other prisoners might attack you or abuse you.

Tammy: On Women of Hope today, our friend Diane has been talking to us about how a person can cope in prison. But Diane how does the *family* of a prisoner cope?

Diane: Prison sentences are meant to punish those who have committed a crime; but often the prisoner's family is also punished; they often suffer badly as they live with the consequences of their family member's crime. And if the prisoner is away for a long period of time, it places a great burden on that family.

Tammy: And I'm sure the family might be *worried* about them too.

Diane: Yes – if they're in a prison that's known for being violent, crowded, or unhealthy, the family members will naturally be very concerned about their well-being and safety. Family members often feel isolated and suffer emotional trauma and prejudice from others.

Then of course, if the prisoner was the only money-earner for the family, the family will struggle to survive. This type of stress can cause a huge problem within a marriage and can deeply affect a child

whose parent has been removed from the home.

Carol: Diane, I can only imagine how children of prisoners can easily become the forgotten victims of crime. Without a stable and secure home, children could feel neglected and might not have their most basic needs - like food, healthcare or education.

Diane: That's right Carol. In some countries, children might even be sent to prison with their parent and forced to face the darkness of that environment. Research shows that these children are six times more likely to commit crimes than other children.

Tammy: Children were never intended to live within those walls.

Diane: No! When a parent is taken from a home, arrested and sentenced to prison, the child might feel that they too are locked behind a wall of loneliness and isolation ...abandoned!

But there is hope! The Lord Jesus Christ makes the same promise to everyone - including prisoners and their families - to set the captives free. Now this might not mean freedom from prison, but Jesus can help you to deal with the anger, the hurt, the disappointment and the loneliness.

Diane: There *is* hope. I want to share some special words from God's word, the Bible, in the book of Psalms chapter 121. Carol would you read it for us?

Carol: I'd love to Diane. You might have heard us talk of King David. He needed help and this is what he said: (v1) "I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth."

Diane: Here, God's word invites people everywhere to "look out" of their present circumstances and "look up" to the ever-present help of Almighty God. When you do that, he is there waiting for you.

For the millions of prisoners around the world, this is more than a polite suggestion. It is the key to survival and the only way to make a true change in their life.

Often, even when the need for change is obvious, many people who have broken the law believe it's impossible to change. They might say, "I've tried to change, it doesn't work." "Life is just too hard on the outside" or "I don't know how to change." I have often heard these words from prisoners.

Tammy: I think that's true for all of us – especially when we're trying to change a bad habit. We say we want to make changes, or act differently but it seems impossible and we fail over and over.

Diane: That's very true Tammy. Some prisoners are very serious about change, "When I get out of

prison, I'm never coming back," they say, "I'm going to turn my life around – this time for sure." Yet the sad reality is that many fail and return to prison within two years. This shows us that prison cannot change the human character, or change a heart for good. *Real* change comes from the "inside" not from the "outside."

Can you please read, Carol, what the prophet Jeremiah said in the Bible, in chapter 13 verse 23.

Carol: Sure, he said: 'Can you ever change and do what's right? Can people change the color of their skin, or can a leopard remove its spots? (CEV) Neither can you start doing good if you have always done evil.' (NLT)

Diane: So what *can* you do to change? Remember those words we heard before from God's word...? 'Lift up your eyes to the hills…to God…where your help comes from."

And God also says: (Ezekiel 36:25-27 The Voice translation) "I (God) will sprinkle you with clean water, and you will be clean. I will wash away all of your dirtiness, and you will be clean and pure, free from the stain of idols. I will plant a new heart and a new spirit inside you. I will take out your stubborn, stony heart and give you a willing, tender heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit inside you and inspire you to live by my statutes and follow my laws."

As a prisoner, you can attend every program a prison offers, and these programs can certainly help you gain knowledge and skills...and you can try really hard never to offend again and never to return to prison, but the truth is 'without God we can do nothing.'

A man or a woman can make plans about the way they *think* they should go but the truth is - only God knows the right path. After all, He created you...and knows you...and loves you.

He says: (John 15:5 NLT) "I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you live in me and I (live) in you, you will bear much fruit. Without me, you can do nothing."

This is very true. We were created to be one with God. After this music, I want to tell you a little story to help you understand your need for God...

God's word tells us that in the beginning of time, God and his creation, human beings, were in relationship. His life was breathed into them and their lives were good.

Think for a moment with me about the relationship between a fish and water. If someone asked the fish if living in the water was good, or the right thing to do, the question would be silly, wouldn't it? Of

course it's good for the fish!

It would be just as silly to ask you whether breathing was a good thing or not. Of course it's good! We can't live without breathing!

Living in water is necessary for every fish. Fish cannot live properly anywhere else!

Have you ever seen a fish when it comes out of the water? Maybe it was washed up on a beach somewhere? The fish immediately starts to experience the pain of being separated from that water. The fish struggles and may do a few flip-flops and gradually, without the water, it will lose its breath and die.

Now, why doesn't the water come and rescue the fish? That would be silly to expect --- wouldn't it? The water doesn't rescue the fish because it can't! The water provides everything the fish needs, but the water cannot *force* the fish to stay in it.

And wouldn't it be silly to tell that fish, as it was dying, "You're a stupid, bad fish! That's what you get for jumping out of the water! You shouldn't have left it! You deserve to die. You are a bad fish!"

Those statements are foolish, because they totally miss the point, don't they?

The message that the fish out of water obviously needs to hear is, "You are dying! You are experiencing pain because you're out of the water! Get back into the water and live the life you were created to live."

I sometimes wonder whether I could have avoided many years of pain, abuse, isolation and drug addiction if, early in my life, someone had just told ***me*** the truth -- that inside, I was slowing dying because I was not in a right relationship with God. I was not living my life the way I was created to live it.

Thank God, I am free today from all that pain because someone *did* take the time to tell me the truth about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

He was born of the virgin Mary...suffered...was crucified...died...and was buried...and after 3 days he rose up from the dead. He did all this to take the punishment for my sin. My sin had separated me from God and the punishment for that sin is death.

But God loves all of us, so much that even in our sin, he made a way out, through the death of Jesus Christ. Through Jesus' death we can be forgiven and brought back together with God the way we

were created to be. All we need to do is believe and *lift our eyes up* to God, where our help comes from!

That changes everything!

If anyone had told me years ago that I'd be telling people, including prisoners, about Jesus Christ, I would have laughed in their face! But when I learned about who Jesus REALLY WAS, and what he has done for me, my life began to change...and so can yours.

If you are in prison, let me encourage you; even in your *very* difficult circumstances, prison can be the best thing that ever happens to you. Many prisoners I've met have actually told me that! At first I didn't believe them because I was looking at the conditions of the prison environment.

But once they began to tell me about the real turning points in their lives, as they "lifted their eyes up" to God, and received his help, I began to understand. It led them to a new way of thinking and gave them a new purpose in life. And although some were still behind bars, they were free on the inside. They received new hearts filled with the love of Jesus Christ.

Don't let your time in prison use you. Use your time in prison well. Reach out for support and help. There are chaplains in prison in many countries. Talk with one today if you can. If not, ask God to provide someone who can help you.

If you *know* someone in prison, remember them as if you were in prison with them.

One day, the Lord Jesus Christ will come back. He was telling his followers about it. Carol, can you read again from God's word...from Matthew chapter 25...

Carol: Jesus said, "But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit as King upon his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence...
Then he will say to those who have followed him: 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you invited me into your home. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you cared for me; I was in prison and you visited me.' Then these righteous ones will ask, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? When were you a stranger and we showed you hospitality? Or naked and we gave you clothing? When did we ever see you sick, or in prison, and we visited you?' And the King will answer, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me.'" (Matthew 25:31-40 NLT)

Diane: Jesus expects us to reach out and take care of those who need our help. And when we do this, it's as if we're doing it for Jesus Himself.

A prison wall does not keep the love, mercy and grace of Jesus Christ out. He knows no boundaries. Jesus' mercy reaches out to all men and women – no matter what they've done or where they are, or what we think of them.

God sent his only Son, Jesus, for *everyone*, so that our sins may be forgiven. So that *everyone*, no matter what they've done or how bad the circumstances are, can have another chance. *Everyone* includes prisoners. *Everyone* includes those that *we* think don't deserve it. God does not have favorites! He treats all his children equally. And he longs for you to come to him.

But, the truth is, if we break the law, there are consequences...and some might even face a *lifetime* in jail for their crimes.

Yet, God still forgives, provides hope, and gives help in our time of need. No matter where we're living!

Tammy: Thank you Diane. What a blessing it is to know that God wants to give us hope and the help that we need. He says so in his word.

Remember that we at Women of Hope care about you and love you, and we love to hear from you. You can contact us in care of this station or at TWRWomen of Hope. The email address is TWRWomenofHope@twr.org

That's TWRWomenofHope@twr.org

If you have missed a program or would even like to hear one again you can do that on our website TWRWomenofHope.org. or by visiting us on our Facebook page.

Diane: Goodbye, and no matter where you are we pray that God will bless you.

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