

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA
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Dearest grandchild,

Today's letter will deal with the influence of the Bible on the famous, or should I say "infamous" Angola Prison in Louisiana. At one time it was known as the bloodiest prison in the U.S. There are over 5,000 inmates there and I think something like 85% are booked with life sentences.

As a point of interest, our government in its wisdom will not allow the Bible to be taught in public, but will allow the Bible to be taught in prisons. Hum!

Most of the following information about the Angola Prison has been taken from an article in the Baptist Press by Dennis Shere.

As I said, Angola was once called the bloodiest prison in America. Today, however, this prison has a new reputation. Credit for this unprecedented transformation is given to warden Burl Cain. He governs the massive prison on the Mississippi River delta with an iron fist. He recognized the daunting challenge of Angola and only agreed to be warden there if he was allowed to run the prison as he felt best. Since Burl Cain is strong for Jesus, he began a strong emphasis on teaching the Bible to these thousands of prisoners without hope. Burl states: "I truly believe these men can rebuild their lives -- lives that have been shattered by awful crimes -- if they embrace a genuine change of heart." Since Christ is in the business of changing hearts, Burl believes that even the most hardened criminals can be genuinely transformed, and some perhaps even released.

Cain knew three things for certain:

- # 1 - Society considers prisoners to be non-persons.
- # 2 - A despairing prisoner with no hope is a dangerous one.
- # 3 - No one is beyond God's love, forgiveness and redemption -- not even hardened criminals.

Unless something changes in an inmate's heart, he is likely to remain angry and bitter at the world that rejected him. Cain felt there was only one answer, only one way to reach these offenders and convert them into men who genuinely wanted to make something of themselves. He knew there must be a true conversion deep inside, touching an inmate's very soul in that secret place where no man could fool himself. Cain believed moral rehabilitation had to occur in order for an inmate to lift himself beyond the jungle atmosphere that too often smothers a prison. He believed the only way for true change was Jesus. Cain and his team worked tirelessly to create a new prison, a better prison, a place where men sentenced to life imprisonment could choose to make lives and homes for themselves within the prison walls. Cain wanted an environment that was safer both for the inmates and employees alike. He was determined to add value and moral responsibility to inmates' lives. Cain therefore invited New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary to launch a rigorous four-year college extension course for inmates who desired a college degree. The program is funded largely by private donations.

Every weekday, more than 100 men crowd into classrooms in the prison to study the Bible and take courses toward a college degree. This program is accredited the same as one from Louisiana State University. Cain also began a certificate program for faith-based education, aimed at inmates who didn't have a high school diploma or its GED equivalent. More than 100 inmates earned their certificate in 2006. Graduates who feel called to the ministry are transferred, with no special favors, to other Louisiana prisons to serve as missionaries. In one year alone, they baptized more than 150 prisoners and averaged more than 15,000 evangelistic contacts a month throughout the state's correctional system.

Angola is still very much a prison, and rules are rigidly enforced. When critics express their concern about the separation of church and state the remarkable transformation of the prison causes their criticism to fade away. The violent death rate has declined significantly, along with rapes, drug use, and assaults on guards. Inmates can now be found holding prayer services in the yards, in their dormitories, and on the work sites. Praise and worship services are now "normal". The truth is, Jesus is in this place and hearts are changing. Hope is alive, the prison is peaceful, and inmates can prepare for heaven even if they will never get out of Angola prison alive.

I hope and pray that you will take time to read the Bible every day. Jesus said: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). As someone quipped: "The Bible will keep you from sin, and sin will keep you from the Bible."

I love you,

Grandpa Boyce