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OVERCOMING THE IMPACT OF ABANDONMENT ON
INMATES AT TROUSDALE TURNER
CORRECTIONAL CENTER

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OVERCOMING THE IMPACT OF ABANDONMENT ON
INMATES AT TROUSDALE TURNER
CORRECTIONAL CENTER

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For the glory of God

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BJS	Bureau of Justice Statistics
NCJ	National Criminal Justice
TDOC	Tennessee Department of Corrections

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PREFACE

This project is the culmination of many years of academic learning and personal experiences. First and foremost, I am grateful to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who saved me from my sins in the early morning hours of April 7, 2003. My life has not been the same since he forgave me and reconciled me to the Heavenly Father through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Second, I am thankful for the influence of my parents, Thomas and Cindy Johnson, and grandparents, Dr. B. L. and Melba Johnson. Their love for the Lord, struggles in life, and care for my sister Kim and me taught me valuable lessons that still shape me today. Although they entered glory sooner than I expected, their memory remains until we meet again.

Third, the board of directors and the staff at Men of Valor Prison Ministry are a group of men and women who are filled with radical love, faithfulness, and compassion. It is a joy to work with a diverse team of individuals who are committed to proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ both in word and deed. In particular, I must thank board member Jeff Dobyons for his generous gift, which was an answer to prayer. It became a catalyst that encouraged me to begin the doctoral program at Southern. Raul Lopez and Curt Campbell have supported me through this process. Tommy Mathis agreed to hire me as a prison minister and now oversees me as Prison Ministry Director. Marcus Martin has been a fearless warrior and faithful companion in proclaiming the gospel to inmates. The men in the Men of Valor program, both inside and outside the prison, help me see the power of the gospel to transform lives.

Fourth, there have been many who aided me in understanding biblical counseling and led me to the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors. James Keen

first introduced me to the Faith Biblical Counseling Training. Currey Womack, Men's Life Recovery Director at Nashville Rescue Mission, sent me to the training in 2012. Dale Stinson, Josh Coleman, and Donald Coney encouraged me on the journey to becoming ACBC certified, while Dr. Ron Allchin served as my supervisor. I am grateful for these godly men who have helped me and others involved with ACBC.

Fifth, the brothers and sisters at Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church are a privilege to love and serve. We started as a small family of believers, and we have continued to grow in grace through many joys and sorrows. One sorrow occurred during my final year in this program. I was able to walk with Deacon J. T. Honeycutt, also known as Pop, until his final breath and entrance into glory. He set an example of Christian love for his family and church. Bethlehem's love for the Scriptures, enjoyment in singing the gospel, and desire to be a spiritually healthy church encourage my family and me. Let us keep believing God together.

Sixth, I want to thank the faculty and staff at Southern. From Jared Mays, representing Southern in a booth at the ACBC conference in Memphis, Tennessee, to Dr. Albert Mohler's leadership, Southern has provided an open door to further my education. Dr. Timothy Beougher, Dr. Robert Jones, and Dr. Jeremy Pierre have taught me invaluable insights into the Scriptures and helped me in ministering to others. I especially want to thank Dr. Matthew Haste, my faculty supervisor, for sharpening me academically and for being a friend.

Finally, this work would not be possible without the love, support, and sacrifices of my best friend and precious wife, Jenna. Like Abraham's Sarah, she has been willing to follow me wherever the Lord has taken us in life and ministry. Together, we are raising four boys, Daniel, Samuel, Elias, and Ezra, to be men of valor; and we welcome a beautiful girl, Jewel, into the world in June 2022. Jenna and I have been

blessed with godly examples and loving support from our extended family.

My hope and prayer are that this project will aid people inside and outside of prison to overcome the pain of abandonment by enjoying God and building relationships.

Brian Johnson

Cottontown, Tennessee

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Godhead exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The three persons of the Trinity have always been in relationship with one another from eternity past, through the present, and into eternity future. When the first man, Adam, was created, God saw that it was not good for man to be alone (Gen 2:18). For man to reflect God's nature, man needs to be engaged in right relationships with God and man (Matt 22:37–40). Therefore, God established marriage and the family as social structures to create relational connections in the home and community (Gen 2:24).

However, many people grow up without knowing the love of God or the natural affection of their parents and siblings (2 Tim 3:3). Due to sin, many continue to rebel against God's design and suffer the pain of abandonment caused by the perpetuation of broken and ungodly relationships. This is true for many inmates at Trowsdale Turner Correctional Center (TTCC). As a minister of the gospel, I am compelled to address this issue of abandonment and bring hope and healing to men at TTCC and others who are imprisoned, whether inmate or free.

Context

Carl Carlson founded the Men of Valor Prison Ministry (MOV) in 1997. This ministry of hope was birthed through a man who had overcome the impact of abandonment in his own life. Carl grew up with minimal knowledge of his parents. As a child, he and his two siblings spent time in an orphanage in Portland, Oregon, until one of

his aunts found them and brought them to her home in Wauchula, Florida.¹ Carl struggled with being unwelcomed and unwanted and chose to run away at the age of ten.²

At twenty-six years old, Carl was sentenced to fifteen years in prison and became an inmate at Tennessee State Prison.³ Four years into his sentence, his brother Philip visited him and shared his newfound faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Philip witnessed to Carl, yet Carl refused to believe there was a God who could be found within the walls of a prison. Philip displayed a peace that mesmerized Carl. At the age of thirty-one, Carl called out to God and was saved by his grace. Six months later, he was released from prison, never to return as an inmate. God would bless him with a godly wife and four sons.

By this time in his life, Carl wanted to give back to the community. He had a vision of helping troubled and disadvantaged children, so he founded what became known as YCAP, the YMCA Community Action Project.⁴ This work was grueling, and after eleven years, he needed rest. With the blessing of the YCAP Board of Directors, Carl was given a sabbatical year to refresh.

During that year, Men of Valor was birthed. One of the troubled teens who had participated in YCAP reached out to Carl from prison. Carl had said he would never reenter a prison, but this young man's cry for help led him behind the walls once again. The first visit became several visits, as other men yearned for love and support. In 1997, Men of Valor was founded with "the commitment to winning men in prison to Jesus

¹ Carl Carlson, *Beyond the Walls: The Story of One Man's Journey from Prison to Freedom . . . and Back Again* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2015), 10–12.

² Reflecting on this time, Carl considered himself a "throw-away" kid. Carl longed for acceptance, security, and a loving home, but he did not know how to handle the suffering caused by abandonment. He continued to run away and rejected the help of reform schools and foster care homes.

³ Carlson, *Beyond the Walls*, 40–41.

⁴ Carlson, *Beyond the Walls*, 94.

Christ and discipling them.”⁵ As the organization’s mission explains, “Our purpose is to equip them to re-enter society as men of integrity—becoming givers of the community rather than takers.”⁶ For the last twenty-five years, the ministry has grown from one man inside one prison in Tennessee to a staff of forty-five who currently serve about fifty men in a residential discipleship academy known as Valor Ridge. Men of Valor reached over nine hundred men inside Tennessee prisons in 2019.⁷

This ministry research project focused on the inmates at Trousdale Turner Correctional Center, located at 140 Macon Way, Hartsville, Tennessee. TTCC is a medium-security prison owned and operated by CoreCivic, a private corrections management firm. The Tennessee Department of Corrections has a contract with CoreCivic to oversee a maximum of 2,672 male inmates.⁸ This facility opened in 2016, and Men of Valor has been ministering there since the fall of 2016.

Throughout the years, Men of Valor has been committed to the proclamation of the gospel inside Tennessee prisons. The founder was saved through the faithful gospel witness of his brother. This is a fundamental strength of the Men of Valor team. Each staff member knows that the hope and healing each inmate needs is found in Jesus Christ. Therefore, there has been a strong emphasis on evangelism to reach more men in prison with the gospel. In 2019, there were 416 men who heard the gospel proclaimed at TTCC at least one time.

In addition to evangelism, Men of Valor has sought to disciple those who come to faith in Christ or those interested in knowing more about Jesus. For some, this is

⁵ Men of Valor Prison Ministry, “Our Mission,” accessed October 1, 2020, <https://men-of-valor.org/>.

⁶ Men of Valor Prison Ministry, “Our Mission.”

⁷ This number was derived from Men of Valor’s attendance records in 2019.

⁸ TDOC Decision Support: Research and Planning, *Tennessee Bed Space and Operating Capacities Report, April 2020* (Nashville: State of Tennessee, 2020), 1, <http://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/correction/documents/BedApril2020.pdf>.

accomplished through weekly biblical preaching in chapel; others join discipleship groups led by Men of Valor volunteers. In discipleship groups, men are challenged weekly to read passages in the Bible, recite memory verses, journal five days a week, and share their lives with one another. These classes increase biblical literacy and provide opportunities for Christ-centered fellowship.

For intensive discipleship purposes, the subject of addiction is often addressed. There is a correlation between crime and addiction. Many men used drugs and alcohol while free and have struggled with this issue for years. The temptation to use does not go away inside the prison. Contraband is smuggled inside the facility by gangs and others and is used to create an economy of bartering and extortion. Therefore, perils abound, and the subject is addressed frequently. Some of the men who come to Men of Valor's classes are actively enrolled in the Residential Drug and Alcohol Program, which is operated by the facility.

Underlying the impulse to use drugs and alcohol is the desire for pleasure and comfort from wounds from the past. Men search for ways to control or possess power. As a result, many men find themselves entangled in gangs—false families that provide identity, security, and activity inside the prison. Some do not use drugs, but they are still swept up in the undercurrent of gang activity. Some are ensnared by both addiction and gangs. Some have not engaged in either, yet they carry deep wounds caused by the absence of healthy relationships. All run to something to help them escape the pain, but the reality is they are receiving false hope and are left with no cure for their sin or suffering outside of Jesus Christ.

The subjects of addiction and gang involvement need to continually be addressed in more robust ways. These are only symptoms of a deeper problem—the pain of abandonment or “relational brokenness.” David Powlison aptly explains,

To be abandoned or attacked brings anguish, heartbreak, and despair. To be used, misused, mistreated, and abused breaks us. But relational distance and breakdown are not always about traumatic events and are not always unilateral. Daily

misunderstandings, disappointments, mutual incomprehension, minor slights, forgetfulness, and indifference can accumulate. Relationships get awkward for reasons that are hard to explain—unrecognized fears, hidden agendas, diverging interests. The human heart is breakable. So are families and friendships. So are churches and workplaces. So are communities and nations. This is the aspect of brokenness in view when people speak of “relational brokenness.”⁹

Many inmates have experienced the absence of God-centered relationships. In many situations, those intimately responsible for bringing them into the world are those most estranged from them. Many have been deserted by a father or possibly a mother who has abdicated the parental role. They know what it is like to live without a father’s protection and are more prone to living in poverty, grief, anger, and fear.¹⁰

As of October 2020, there are 50,568 male and female inmates in Tennessee prisons and jails.¹¹ People who have abandoned God, been abandoned by others, and abandoned others in return will perpetuate painful paths of destruction that impact multiple generations. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 95 percent of inmates in state prisons will be released.¹² Former inmates will be next-door neighbors. Without intervention, two of three inmates will re-offend and return to prison within three years, and almost four of five will return to prison within six years.¹³ Biblical truth must be spoken and radical love expressed. Otherwise, the sad story of Cain will be repeated—a

⁹ David Powlison, “Speaking of Brokenness,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32, no. 1 (2018): 70.

¹⁰ According to the National Center for Health Statistics, part of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 44 percent of births in Tennessee are to unmarried mothers. Single mothers, grandparents, and neighborhoods are left to raise children. With the breakdown of God’s design of marriage and family, Tennessee homes and communities are suffering. National Center for Health Statistics, “Percentage of Babies Born to Unmarried Mothers by State,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified February 24, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/unmarried/unmarried.htm>.

¹¹ TDOC Decision Support: Research and Planning, *Tennessee Felon Population Update, October 2020* (Nashville: State of Tennessee, 2020), 3–6, <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/correction/documents/FelonOctober2020.pdf>.

¹² Timothy Hughes and Doris James Wilson, “Reentry Trends in the United States,” BJS Report, last modified October 1, 2002, 1, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/reentry/reentry.cfm>.

¹³ Mariel Alper, Matthew R. Durose, and Joshua Markman, *2018 Update on Prisoner Recidivism: A 9-Year Follow-up Period (2005-2014)*, BJS Report, NCJ 250975 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2018), 6, <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=6266>.

story of forsaking God, being driven by lust and a continual hardening of the heart toward God and man (Gen 4; 1 John 3:11–18).

For this reason, it is imperative that the subject of abandonment be addressed with the inmates at TTCC. Abandonment is a root cause that lies below the surface of much criminal activity, drug and alcohol use, and gang life. Many do not know God and are angry at the only One who can help them. Many have faced great suffering without the loving support of their parents or as a result of their parents' sins. Many inmates do not understand the nature of their own hearts and the consequences of their personal sin. They search for relief from the pain of broken relationships and settle for false hopes and false families. The lies can be exposed, real hope found, and a new story written.

Rationale

The Bible sufficiently addresses the subject of abandonment. The Lord Jesus Christ, while hanging on the cross, felt desertion and separation from God the Father and cried, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46).¹⁴ While Jesus was becoming the ultimate sin offering, he knew the suffering that accompanies sin. He was forsaken by God the Father, his disciples, the nation of Israel, and the Romans. He was surrounded by the evil and darkness instigated by the devil and his entourage of demons. He faced physical and mental anguish, yet he demonstrated his righteousness by remaining faithful in the midst of his suffering. He endured because he knew God would vindicate his righteous act of sacrificial love (Ps 22:22).

The inmates at TTCC need to know the hope of the gospel and how it addresses the subject of abandonment. It is vital for these men to overcome their past and live faithful, Christian lives in communion with God, family, a biblical community, and the world. To do so, they must remember several essential truths.

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the *English Standard Version*.

First, the inmates at TTCC are men made in the image of God. Whether they acknowledge him or not, they still live before him every day. Each man is either in relationship with the living God or remains alienated from the life of God (Eph 4:18). Regardless, all of the inmates need to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4). It is imperative that every man knows the abandonment Jesus Christ faced on the cross in order to be reconciled to God. As a result of saving faith, an inmate can have a new identity in Christ and begin to ask forgiveness and seek reconciliation with his family. Due to legal matters and the nature of crimes, some may not be able to seek forgiveness or reconciliation with their victims, but an inmate should have a desire or willingness when appropriate.

Second, the gospel reveals the righteousness of God and how a man can have a right standing before God. Furthermore, it clarifies God's design for manhood, marriage, and the family. Inmates at TTCC need to understand God's purposes for men. God did not design men to remain in a state of relational brokenness. He wants men to be whole and involved in biblically healthy relationships. God created marriage to be a union between a man and woman. It would be a stabilizing relationship for children to grow up in a home built on love, acceptance, and grace. These earthly relationships were designed to reflect the nature of God, who is love (1 John 4:8). When an inmate remains ignorant of God's designs, he is prone to repeat the patterns he has been taught rather than living a life of faithfulness towards God and others.

Third, rather than remaining ignorant and perpetuating the problem, the inmates at TTCC need to understand how crime impacts relationships. A man experiencing relational brokenness is tempted to have a calloused heart towards others and commit crimes against those he knows or people he has never met. Additional victims are created, and relationships become damaged or destroyed. When an inmate becomes aware of the pain within and understands the pain that crime causes others, relationships can be built instead of broken.

Fourth, children continue to grow up with absent or abusive fathers. In both cases, a child is left with a distorted view of God and the role of a father. Children yearn for a father figure who will provide nurture and admonition, yet they can be provoked to anger due to the abandonment of their father's God-ordained role in their life (Eph 6:4). Proverbs 29:15 states, "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother." Many mothers are left to carry the weight of raising children alone while the father is still wrestling with the wounds from his own father. Without a loving authority figure, discipline, and acceptance, some children grow up and choose false families, or gangs, who step in to provide acceptance based on dangerous conditions (Prov 1:15). When a young man turns to the streets for wisdom, he engages in folly and suffers the consequences of rebelling against legal authorities. Lessons that should have been learned in a loving home through an engaged father and loving mother are thwarted, and many young men find a new home in a prison like TTCC.

Fifth, communities suffer when men mishandle the pain of abandonment. Some are driven by the pain to build strong marriages, families, churches, and communities, while many neglect relationships, fail to grow in intimacy, and remain afraid to trust others. Men at TTCC must know God has made man to enjoy and engage in building community in their homes and churches for the glory of God rather than allowing crime to tear the fabric of the places God designed to provide belonging, acceptance, and love.

The impact of abandonment is in the DNA of the Men of Valor Prison Ministry and is at the heart of the gospel. The ministry's founder lived through the absence of a loving father and mother. He, his brother, and his sister were left to be cared for by an orphanage and an estranged aunt. The pain of being deserted by those who should have loved him most was a catalyst for his crimes. If not for the grace of God, the cycle of broken relationships may have continued. Instead, the painful cycle was broken, a new family built, and a prison ministry birthed.

The plan for addressing this subject began by examining the existing research concerning incarceration. This required gaining knowledge of relevant information concerning fatherlessness, poverty, gangs, and recidivism rates. Second, the Scriptures were surveyed to gain a comprehensive understanding of God's design for relationships, repentance from sin, the transforming grace of the gospel, and living by faith. Third, a robust curriculum was developed to present to TTCC inmates to inform and seek to transform the hearts of these men.

Purpose

The purpose of this ministry research project was to address the impact of abandonment on inmates at TTCC by developing an intensive discipleship curriculum in an effort to break the cycle of broken relationships, build healthy God-honoring relationships inside the prison, and prepare men to reenter society as men of valor.

Goals

The following three goals were established to measure the completion of this project.

1. The first goal was to assess the current knowledge of the impact of abandonment among inmates at TTCC.
2. The second goal was to develop an eight-session biblical curriculum that explained God's heart concerning the subject of abandonment and God's design for healthy relationships.
3. The third goal was to increase the knowledge of abandonment by teaching a biblical curriculum inside the prison to at least twelve men.

A specific research methodology was created to measure the successful completion of these three goals.¹⁵ All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological

¹⁵ All research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use.

Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project. The research methodology is outlined in the following section.

Research Methodology

Successful completion of this project depended upon the completion of these three goals. The first goal was to assess the current knowledge of the impact abandonment has had on inmates at TTCC. This goal was measured by administering the Abandonment Impact Survey (AIS) to at least twelve inmates prior to the first teaching session.¹⁶ This goal was successfully met when eighteen inmates completed the AIS, providing a clearer picture of the impact of abandonment on the inmates. In addition, qualitative data was gathered through the Abandonment Impact Interview (AII). Eighteen inmates answered the AII questions, and five participants volunteered for an in-depth interview.

The second goal was to develop an eight-session biblical curriculum that explained God's heart concerning the subject of abandonment and God's design for healthy relationships. This goal was measured by an expert panel that utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical soundness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum.¹⁷ This goal was successfully met when the panel determined that a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of abandonment among inmates at TTCC. This goal was measured by administering a pre- and post-survey to eighteen inmates. This survey was used to measure the change in biblical knowledge concerning abandonment before and after the biblical curriculum was presented.¹⁸ The goal was considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a

¹⁶ See appendix 1.

¹⁷ See appendix 3.

¹⁸ See appendix 1.

positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores. Additional data was gathered through interview questions. Due to the need for confidentiality, the inmates were identified by the following: (1) the last two letters of the inmate's first name, (2) the numeric day of birth (0–31), and (3) the first two numbers of his Tennessee Offender Management Information System (TOMIS) number.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms were used in the project:

Abandonment. Abandonment is defined as the sudden or prolonged loss of relationship. It is the condition of “relational brokenness.”¹⁹ More specifically, David Blankenhorn articulates,

Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation. It is the leading cause of declining child-well-being in our society. It is also the engine driving our most urgent social problems, from crime to adolescent pregnancy to child sexual abuse to domestic violence against women.²⁰

The absence of a father is one area of relationship loss or brokenness an inmate may have endured, but he may have lost his mother, grandparents, children, friends, and associates due to the consequences of sin.

Recidivism. Sometimes recidivism is referred to as the “revolving door” of prisons.²¹ According to the TDOC, “Tennessee recidivism is defined as the percentage of felony inmates who are re-incarcerated within three years of their release.”²²

Two limitations applied to this project. First, inmates can be skeptical of

¹⁹ Powlison, “Speaking of Brokenness,” 70.

²⁰ David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 1.

²¹ J-PAL North America, “Stopping the Revolving Prison Door: J-PAL North America Tests Innovative Strategies to Reduce Recidivism and Help Inmates Transition Back to Society,” Massachusetts Institute of Technology News, last modified May 10, 2017, <https://news.mit.edu/2017/stopping-revolving-prison-door-reducing-recidivism-mit-jpal-0510>.

²² TDOC, “Tennessee Recidivism Rate Shows Promising Decrease,” last modified April 20, 2017, <https://www.tn.gov/correction/news/2017/4/20/tdoc-tennessee-recidivism-rate-shows-promising-decrease.html>.

sharing personal information on surveys. To mitigate this limitation, each inmate participant was given an identifying code that aided in the collection of data and protected the participant's anonymity. Second, an inmate cannot control lunch, medical, legal, or work call-outs. To mitigate this limitation, a participant was required to participate in 90 percent of the research project in order to be included in the statistical analysis.

Two delimitations applied to this project. First, inmates are released from prison at various times throughout the year when their sentence ends, they make parole, or they are released on probation. As a result, this project required that a participant have at least two months remaining until his release date. Second, only participants who attended other Men of Valor services were allowed to participate. Men of Valor attendance records are maintained inside the prison. This ensured faithfulness and accountability based on a prior relationship with each inmate.

Conclusion

With the help of God, men at TTCC can overcome the impact of abandonment and become faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, who learned obedience through what he suffered (Heb 5:8). As the wise and faithful Son, Jesus would teach his disciples to walk by faith and not by sight. This has been the path of the just from the beginning (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17).

CHAPTER 2
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR
INMATES OVERCOMING THE IMPACT
OF ABANDONMENT

God designed man for personal relationships. From the beginning, the first man, Adam, was made to know and walk with God and enjoy his holy presence (Gen 3:8). A personal relationship with God was man's greatest gift. As God looked down from heaven on Adam, he saw Adam alone and desired to replicate among humanity a picture of the relationships within the Trinity. God created the woman from man and instituted marriage, the union between a man and a woman. The marriage union would provide a solid foundation for building a family, and children born into a home would be nurtured and admonished to walk in the fear of the Lord. Charles Hodges asserts, "This endearing and intimate relation between parents and children (which cannot exist where monogamy is not the law), binding all in the closest union which can exist among men, makes the family the corner-stone of the well-being of society on earth, and the type of the blessedness of heaven."¹ The family as God designed is the pattern for building strong and healthy communities where people love their neighbors as they love themselves (Matt 7:12; 22:39).

When Adam transgressed God's law, his sin created separation between man and God and disrupted the peace within his marriage. The fall of man introduced tragic consequences into the world. Rather than perpetuating God's pattern for the home, sinful man often neglects God's wisdom. The generational principle of leaving one's father and

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Soteriology* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 349.

mother, cleaving to one's wife, and becoming one flesh has been corrupted (Gen 2:24). Lust leads to individuals pursuing sexual union outside the boundaries of marriage, often resulting in children born into homes where men have failed to make a long-term commitment (Heb 13:4). The relationships in the home are estranged from the beginning, and in some cases, a father or mother is heartless toward their child (Rom 1:31; 2 Tim 3:3). In other cases, a father and mother may have married, but due to selfishness, the marriage ended in divorce, leaving children in relational ruins (Mark 10:5). Instead of the example of a godly home, a person may not have an intact family to leave in order to cleave unto his or her spouse, and the pain of relational brokenness lingers and impacts future relationships.

This chapter explores three themes that relate to overcoming the impact of abandonment on inmates at TTCC. These include the patterned life of a wise son, the brokenness and hope demonstrated in the life of Jeremiah, and the perfect example of Jesus, the wise Son, who overcame the impact of abandonment by faith and calls people to follow him in discipleship as a delight to the Father's heart. To truly understand the impact of abandonment, an inmate must see how his life has deviated from God's pattern for relationship. The following section describes God's wisdom for relational intimacy between God and a family functioning for his glory and warns sons of the temptation to live a foolish life.

The Patterned Life of a Wise Son (Prov 1:7–19)

In Proverbs 1–9, King Solomon sought to impart wisdom to his son who would be tempted to conform to the ways of the world by ignoring God's purpose for man and his design for the home (Rom 12:2). A wise father establishes patterns of godliness in his personal life, marriage, and oversight of his children. In Proverbs 1:7–19, a pattern emerges that instructs a wise son to fear the Lord, listen to God-ordained authority, reject the solicitation of gangs, and avoid an untimely death; this pattern establishes a

foundation of relational intimacy for the next generation. Based on Solomon’s teaching, a wise son listens to God’s Word and builds his life on a solid foundation of truth, while the fool rejects Scripture and builds his life on shifting sand (Matt 7:24–27).

The Wise Son Fears the Lord (Prov 1:7)

In the opening chapter of Proverbs, Solomon addresses the fundamental lesson in education: the fear of the Lord. David Hubbard explains that fear is best understood as “reverent obedience.”² In light of the awesome majesty of God, one submits himself to the authority, will, and purposes of the Almighty. Tremper Longman III posits, “To fear Yahweh is to stand in subservient position to him, to acknowledge one’s dependence upon him.”³ In essence, the fear of the Lord is understanding that one is incapable of doing anything good apart from him (John 15:5). Therefore, the fear of the Lord is the starting point for aligning a person’s life according to the truth and wisdom of God. Without this fundamental principle of learning, the whole of one’s life will drift from the center of God’s will. Bruce Waltke illustrates, “What the alphabet is to reading, notes to reading music, and numerals to mathematics, the fear of the Lord is to attaining the revealed knowledge of this book.”⁴ Without the fear of the Lord, a person’s life is misaligned and will go in the wrong direction.

From the start, Solomon addresses the two paths one might follow. Longman communicates, “One of the most pervasive metaphors of the first nine chapters is *derek*, a Hebrew term variously translated as ‘way,’ ‘path’ or ‘road.’”⁵ The wise son will travel

² David A. Hubbard and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Proverbs*, Preacher’s Commentary Series 15 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 48.

³ Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 101.

⁴ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1–15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 181.

⁵ Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 25.

down the path of fearing the Lord and pleasing him. The quest of knowing God and revealing his wisdom in the world leads the wise son into a deepening relationship with God and in building godly relationships with others. On the contrary, the foolish son disdains God's wisdom and instruction. He rejects God's ways and discipline and faces the consequences. Garrett advises, "A principle that believers must teach their children is that in their pursuit of wisdom they will be surrounded by others going the opposite direction who will be encouraging them to do likewise."⁶ As a result, the wise son can expect to suffer persecution (2 Tim 3:12).

The Wise Son Listens to God-Ordained Authority (Prov 1:8–9)

A wise son manifests the fear of the Lord in his heart by honoring the authority in his life. In biblical wisdom, a child would be born into a family in which a father and mother were joined together in marriage. From this union, a child would enter the world to be nurtured and raised in the fear of the Lord. The imperative for a child is to listen and obey his parents in honor and love for their God-ordained authority in his life. Waltke adds, "The tender address, *my son*, connotes that the father considers his son as his spiritual heir, not merely his biological offspring."⁷ The father and mother love their child and desire to train him up in the ways of the Lord.

A young man who walks in the fear of the Lord and honors his parents is modeling faithfulness and is adorned with a graceful garland for his head and pendants for his neck (Prov 1:9). Allen Ross interjects, "For heeding the instruction of the law, the disciple is promised an attractiveness of life."⁸ In addition, John Kitchen explains, "To

⁶ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary, vol. 14 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 68.

⁷ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 186.

⁸ Allen P. Ross, *Proverbs*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 907.

heed the discipline of father and the instruction of mother yields a happy life full of fruitful and friendly relationships. People will be drawn to you and desire your company.”⁹ A humble disposition toward authority, a character of integrity, and a life well-lived crowns a young man and sets him up to be an overcomer in life (1 John 5:4–5).

The Wise Son Rejects the Solicitation of Gangs (Prov 1:10–14)

A wise father prepares his son by encouraging him to stay on the straight and narrow road and warning him of the dangers in the world (Josh 1:7). Once again, the father has an affectionate heart toward his son, and he knows temptations abound to seek the approval of others, throw off the discipline of work, and make easy money (Prov 1:10). Waltke exposts, “The father brilliantly puts words into the sinners’ mouths that both condemn them and expose their enticement.”¹⁰ The wise father pleads with his son to avoid the foolish ways of young men in the streets, as they are the antithesis of God’s wisdom. First, these young men have banded together into a gang that serves as a place of belonging, support, and protection.¹¹ Instead of fearing the Lord, honoring parents, and loving one’s neighbor as oneself, the gang of robbers and murderers bring guilt on themselves, shame their families, and terrorize the community by inflicting pain and sorrow on innocent people (Prov 1:11). The wise father exposes the gang’s lust for illusive power and love of money.

⁹ John A. Kitchen, *Proverbs*, Mentor Commentaries (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2006), 43.

¹⁰ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 190.

¹¹ The TDOC defines a street gang as “a Security Threat Group formed in the community for protection and/or criminal gain, but that may have continued contact with incarcerated members.” Commonly referred to as STGs, the desire of these groups to obtain power and money are dangerous to society. TDOC Internal Affairs Division, *Security Threat Group: Threat Assessment, Major Groups*, accessed August 10, 2021, https://www.gangenforcement.com/uploads/2/9/4/1/29411337/stg_threat_assessment__tn_major_groups__apr_2010__les_.pdf.

The Wise Son Avoids an Untimely Death (Prov 1:15–19)

The wise father who walks in the fear of the Lord knows God’s heart and his law (Exod 34:6–7). The fifth commandment states, “Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Deut 5:16). The apostle Paul explained how this is the first commandment with a promise (Eph 6:2–3). Wise children who are God-fearing and adorned with gracious character will, by general rule, enjoy the blessings of God and live longer lives than those caught up in criminal activity.

The wise son comes to a moment of decision (Prov 1:15). The wise father has already exposed the gang’s motive as the love of money and the temporary pleasures it provides. Next, he reveals the deadly trap the gang is setting for themselves. Garrett enlightens, “The heart of the warning is that crime is self-destructive.”¹² Simply stated, the father describes the wisdom of a bird able to escape a trap it can see (Prov 1:17). However, the gang members are blind to reality and will eventually get caught or die an untimely death. Kitchen contributes, “The ultimate reason not to fall in with the sinful and violent is that what they plot for others (v. 11) becomes their own undoing (v. 18).”¹³ The father loves his son and does not want to be at his burial. He desires for him to see through the empty promises of the street gang—a false family—and replicate the godly patterns of life for the next generation.

While the pattern of godly living is established in Scripture, the apostle Paul asserts, “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another” (Titus 3:3). Apart from a work of God’s grace on a person’s heart, humanity rebels against God and his design for relationships. Fathers and mothers fail to know and

¹² Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 70.

¹³ Kitchen, *Proverbs*, 46–47.

honor God, abandon the role of raising children, and establish foolish patterns of relationships, causing devastating consequences for generations. The book of Lamentations provides a history lesson and warning for those who choose to abandon God's wisdom for relationships. With the city of Jerusalem destroyed, people dead, and others displaced, Jeremiah laments Judah's failure to love God and man as the law prescribed.

Jeremiah Experiences Brokenness Due to Judah's Rebellion and God's Judgment (Lam 3:1–21)

The prophet Jeremiah had been born into a dark time in the history of Judah, and at an early age, God called him to preach repentance to the nation (Jer 1:6). F. B. Huey states, "Israel had committed two sins. The people had abandoned their 'glory' (v. 11), the Lord who had brought them into the promised land and had embraced worthless idols. Jeremiah compared that decision to the exchange of a well of flowing water for a cracked cistern that could not hold water."¹⁴ God's indictment of the nation was apparent. J. Andrew Dearman asserts, "The Lord's historic faithfulness in the events of Exodus, desert wandering, and entry to the Promised Land (2:6–7) is contrasted with the emptiness of Baal and other idolatries."¹⁵ Therefore, rather than experiencing the faithful, satisfying, and refreshing love of God in covenant relationship, the people of Judah abandoned the Lord for idols and suffered the grave consequences of sin. In like manner, many inmates have been raised in homes without a biological father or mother who loved God and imparted wisdom through words and actions. As a result, they were abandoned and became angry, perpetuating foolish lifestyles rather than navigating suffering in a godly manner. In poetic fashion, Jeremiah provides an honest assessment of the depths of

¹⁴ F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, New American Commentary, vol. 16 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 64.

¹⁵ J. Andrew Dearman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 59.

his suffering and teaches one to cry out to God for relief and healing.

Jeremiah's ministry would engage the tension between the faithful God and faithless Judah. R. K. Harrison explains the difficulty of Jeremiah's task, saying, "A person less conscious than Jeremiah of his mission as a divinely appointed prophet to a disbelieving, apostate, and wanton generation might well have abandoned the situation at that point as being absolutely hopeless."¹⁶ Jeremiah remained faithful to his call, yet Judah failed to heed God's message. As a result, Jeremiah would be known as "the weeping prophet."¹⁷ His suffering was wide-ranging:

He suffered both physically and emotionally probably more than any other prophet. He spent a night in the stocks and several periods in cisterns and prisons of various sorts. He experienced a plot against his life by the people of his own village. In addition he suffered the ostracism and misunderstanding of priests, prophets, officials, and ordinary people over many years.¹⁸

Although Jeremiah was faithful to God's calling, he suffered due to the nation's idolatry and witnessed God's judgment of Jerusalem in 586 BC. The bustling city of Jerusalem became a lonely place filled with mourning (Lam 1:1).

Jeremiah Describes His Suffering as a Living Death (Lam 3:1–6)

In Lamentations 3, Jeremiah, the representative of the people of Judah, records the experiences of suffering that are common in his case and in inmates who suffer due to family dysfunction, personal idolatry, or tragedies that are beyond their control. Jeremiah expresses the personal nature of his suffering. He says, "I am the man" (Lam 3:1). The story of the fall of Jerusalem has become part of his personal story. Philip Ryken explains, "Jeremiah's personal lament is a reminder that suffering is always personal."

¹⁶ R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (London: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 17.

¹⁷ Walter A. Elwell, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 2, J-Z (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), s.v. "prophecy."

¹⁸ J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 94–95.

When nations go through times of tragedy and tribulation, the greatest suffering always takes place at the individual level.”¹⁹ Jeremiah has a personal story of the situations he has faced. Michael Wilcock asserts, “They are a catalogue of sufferings—darkness, injury, imprisonment, chains, obstruction, wild beasts, arrows, ridicule, some literal, some metaphorical, and in no sort of order.”²⁰ His life has been a painful journey. Jerusalem, a city of idolatrous people, deserved what she received. God’s righteous anger had been unleashed, and Jeremiah suffered “under the rod of his wrath” (Lam 3:1). Many men in prison have experienced the collapse of God’s design for the family for multiple generations (Exod 34:7). The inmates are filled with grief and pain, but they must not develop a victim mentality. Prisoners need to understand how the sins of others have impacted their lives and learn to take ownership of their actions. They can be like Jeremiah—more than a mere victim or survivor, but an overcomer with a painful past and glorious future.

Jeremiah knows God has led him into a dark place in his life (Lam 3:1–3). Huey provides insight, explaining, “The absence of God’s name in vv. 1–20 (except in v. 18) may have been intentional to emphasize the sense of abandonment and alienation from God.”²¹ Jeremiah feels alone in the darkness, and he has more questions than answers. He loves God and his people, but at this time, he cannot see any hope for the future. He does not understand the fullness of his experience and chooses to lament.

Jeremiah is heartbroken, in misery, and depressed. Jeremy Pierre posits, “A person experiences depression in despairing of hope to such a degree that his affection is negatively influenced, which is closely related to decreased volitional motivation and

¹⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: From Sorrow to Hope*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 752.

²⁰ Michael Wilcock, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: The Death of a Dream and What Came After*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2013), 23.

²¹ Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 470.

negative cognitive outlooks.”²² He experiences this dark time in his life and does not see the light at the end of the tunnel. He feels that God has repeatedly turned away from him, and he struggles to see beyond the brokenness of his heart or the city. Nevertheless, Jeremiah laments in faith. This season may not appear to be a place of growth, but God is working. Many inmates find themselves in a similar place of despair, but like Jeremiah, they can lament and turn to God in faith, trusting him to produce something good in the darkness.

Jeremiah describes the intensity of the suffering as affecting his physical and spiritual vitality (Lam 3:4–6). The destruction of Jerusalem was traumatic, and the ramifications would be prolonged. Over a century would pass before the walls of Jerusalem would be rebuilt (Neh 1:3; 2:13; 3:1). Jeremiah did not know this, but he was reminded every day when he failed to see Solomon’s temple standing and the saints singing with joy. Jerusalem and the nation of Judah would never be the same. There would be no going back to the old ways. Huey describes this time as “the weariness of aging and the pain of broken bones.”²³ Also, Jeremiah had been terrorized by the siege of the city. He did not know if he would live or die. He had been surrounded by the Babylonian army, who he could not trust to protect him. It was one of the hardest, most bitter, and distressing times in his life. It was a living death (Lam 3:6).

Jeremiah Describes His Suffering as an Inescapable Situation Full of Trauma and Bitterness (Lam 3:7–15)

Jeremiah describes his suffering as an inescapable situation (Lam 3:7–9).

Adele Berlin contends, “The poet feels walled in, locked up in a dark place from which

²² Jeremy Pierre, “A Darkness You Can Feel: Depressed in a Fallen World” (unpublished class notes for 34330, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Spring Semester, 2020), 3.

²³ Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 470.

there is no escape—a graphic, physically concrete metaphor for captivity.”²⁴ He feels trapped with nowhere to go. Jeremiah feels helpless, yet he remains faithful despite heaven’s silence. Nothing seems to be changing in the state of Jerusalem, but God is working.

Jeremiah illustrates the fears associated with the traumatic event of Jerusalem’s destruction. Jeremiah did not know if he would live or die in this experience. Berlin illustrates, “From the feeling of being enclosed or trapped in vv. 5–9, the poem moves to a different kind of being trapped—an animal trapped by a hunter.”²⁵ Jeremiah describes God as a vicious and hungry bear lying in wait or a lion hiding in secret (Lam 3:10). Instead of enjoying the protection of the Shepherd, he is caught in the crosshairs of God’s judgment of the nation. His hopes and dreams of Jerusalem repenting are dashed, and this experience has become a nightmare. This is not the way he thought life was going to be. Instead, Jeremiah has been dragged off his path and torn to pieces. Metaphorically, the bear and lion have dug in their claws and shredded his life to pieces. He is wounded and traumatized. He has become desolate, or “devastated, destitute, laid waste, ravaged, ruined, or deserted.”²⁶ He is living his worst nightmare and believes he has been targeted by the Sovereign God. All he can do is lament the pain.

Jeremiah describes the piercing nature of trials sent by God and the humiliation he faced as a result of trusting in God. Job, in his personal suffering, used similar language, stating, “For the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me” (Job 6:4). Jeremiah has been struck by God’s arrow in his kidneys. The souls of Judah and of Jeremiah have been penetrated by

²⁴ Adele Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 90.

²⁵ Berlin, *Lamentations*, 91.

²⁶ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

God's judgment. As if the trial was not enough, the proud people of Judah continued to taunt Jeremiah. Like Job and Jesus, those around Jeremiah delighted in his righteous suffering and made fun of his continued trust in God despite the dire circumstances (Job 30:4; Mark 15:30–31). Jeremiah concludes he has eaten a buffet of bitterness and grief and drank cup after cup of wormwood, "this herb is perhaps so called as being noxious and poisonous."²⁷ Jeremiah was sick with sorrows.

Jeremiah Knew His Suffering Was the Result of Human Depravity and Was Difficult to Describe (Lam 3:16–21)

Jeremiah describes understanding the weight of his humanity. In antiquity, sometimes captors adulterated the food before it was fed to the captives.²⁸ With sand or rocks placed in the food supply, the eater's teeth could break. This would denote both a painful and humiliating experience of eating dust (Gen 3:14, 19). This sounds atrocious, but sinful humanity is capable of far worse acts that cause others to suffer. In addition, Jeremiah was looking for peace. Biblical peace is the "total well-being, prosperity, and security associated with God's presence among his people."²⁹ Due to the idolatry of Judah, Jeremiah had been "bereft of peace" (Lam 3:17). He could not find it in this world. He had also forgotten what it was like to be happy. Jeremiah had become accustomed to misery and loneliness. As he thought about his experience, he wondered if anything would get better.

Jeremiah's greatest fears had been realized; the sin of the nation of Judah had caused personal misery and homelessness. He was left wondering and wandering, and the unpleasant experience was beyond his ability to express. Huey expounds, "The sufferings

²⁷ Wilhelm Gesenius and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003), 440.

²⁸ Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 224.

²⁹ Elwell, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "peace."

were so deeply impressed in the heart of the victim that he found himself constantly thinking about them. His memory left him depressed and despondent.”³⁰ Jeremiah found it hard to express his pain and bitterness with words, so he described the experience as wormwood and gall. Gall was “a bitter and poisonous herb.”³¹ If one mishandles the pain, one can be tempted to have a victim mentality and be angry and bitter the rest of his life. However, Jeremiah provides a better remedy. As he was groaning and lamenting, he remembered the Lord’s character and found hope to guide him through the darkness.

Jeremiah Expresses Hope in the Faithfulness of God

The people of Judah had been unfaithful to God by breaking their covenant with him, and the whole nation suffered as a result of their idolatry. Jeremiah represents the nation in grief; however, he also represents anyone who has experienced the weight of sin. Jeremiah was not a sinless man, yet he had obeyed the Lord by fulfilling his calling. As a righteous sufferer, he was grieved because the nation had turned to idolatry, which impacted interpersonal relationships. The Lord brought destruction to Jerusalem and led the people into Babylonian captivity. Relationships were broken, but John Goldingay admonishes, “The poem in effect invites Judahites not to be so overwhelmed by God’s recent abandonment that they forget another aspect of the dynamic of their past relationship with God.”³² Jeremiah remembers the Lord during his grief and this one action changes everything.

The Character of God Is the Foundation of Hope (Lam 3:22–24)

Jeremiah and the nation of Judah would have been without hope if God had

³⁰ Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 472.

³¹ Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 912.

³² John Goldingay, *Lamentations and Ezekiel for Everyone*, Old Testament for Everyone (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 23.

abandoned them forever. However, God had made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob far exceeding this faithless moment in Judah's history. The Lord had a bigger story that was being written for his glory. Walter Kaiser explains, "It is His *hesed* that rescues the sufferer from the despair and depression that had threatened to bottle him up forever. Just when he came to the breaking point, suddenly, like relief directly from heaven, came this thought—I do have something to which I can fasten my hope."³³ In Jeremiah's darkest hour, he turned away from his circumstances and found hope in the Lord's covenant faithfulness. Robert Davidson expounds,

All the great words of assurance come tumbling out: God's "steadfast love" (*hesed*), that constancy which means that he could never walk out on his people; his "mercies", his warm compassion (*raham*, a Hebrew word that basically means the womb); and his "faithfulness", that dependable support which will never let anyone down.³⁴

Jeremiah knows God's covenant love is sufficient to help him and others through this trial because the Lord's tender affections for his people never come to an end. In mercy, the Lord kept them from complete destruction. Paul House writes, "Though Israel sinned against God through idolatry, immorality, oppression, and other forms of long-term covenantal adultery to such an extent that he finally punishes severely, the Lord will still start over with penitent Israelites."³⁵ Jeremiah understands everything will not be different overnight, but possessing a right heart in the midst of suffering will provide healing, renewal, and transformation. The past could be overcome. Davidson explains, "This is the story of the past, but it is a past which in faith can be relieved to become part of present experience."³⁶ The promises of God can be trusted because they are founded

³³ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God: Christian Assurance and the Message of Lamentations* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2004), 89.

³⁴ Robert Davidson, *Jeremiah Volume 2 and Lamentations*, Daily Study Bible Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 193.

³⁵ Paul House, *Lamentations*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 23b, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word, 2004), 414.

³⁶ Davidson, *Jeremiah Volume 2 and Lamentations*, 194.

on the faithfulness of God. House posits, “Each new day dawns with the possibility of covenant renewal for a punished people. This opportunity lasts as long as God lasts since it is grounded in his personal character.”³⁷ Jeremiah knows the people of Judah have been displaced and driven out of the land. Still, he realizes the starting place for rebuilding their lives is trusting in the character of God, whether in the ruined city of Jerusalem or dispersed among Babylonians. He knows he can be an overcomer by trusting God to bring good out of dark times.

The Goodness of God (Lam 3:25–27)

The Babylonians had destroyed the city of Jerusalem, killed many of the people of Judah, and taken others away as prisoners of war. These actions were not good, but Jeremiah admonishes everyone to trust in the unchanging character of God. He has always been and always will be good, and since he cannot act contrary to his nature, everything he does is good. Grudem explains, “The goodness of God means that God is the final standard of good, and that all that God is and does is worthy of approval.”³⁸ Jeremiah postulates that God’s goodness is motivation for waiting on and seeking God (Lam 3:25). Phillip Ryken explains waiting on God, saying, “It is rather an active resting in the goodness of God, with the hopeful expectation that someday one’s trials will come to an end.”³⁹ Through submission to God’s will and trust in his timing, Jeremiah believed the people of God would be delivered from their calamity and once again see the goodness of God in their lives.

The Omnipotence of God (Lam 3:28–30)

The Judahite’s idolatry had been exposed, and the nation had been made aware

³⁷ Garrett and House, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, 414–15.

³⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 1509.

³⁹ Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 756.

of their weakness. Now, the people of Judah are commanded to sit alone in silence for the purpose of reflection. Garrett posits, “To wait silently here means to confess God’s power in the situation, to trust in the Lord’s faithfulness and covenant mercy (3:19–24), and to embrace humility in the face of what has happened.”⁴⁰ At this point, the Judahites are unable to change their circumstances, but they can change their disposition concerning the situation. Rather than holding their heads high in pride, the nation had the opportunity to bow their faces to the ground in hopes of God acting on their behalf. The nation had been humiliated by the Babylonians, but the Judahites could trust God’s power to work something good through their physical suffering and overwhelming shame. Any unjust suffering the nation experienced would be rectified by the power of God.

The Mercy of God (Lam 3:31–33)

Jeremiah recognizes the Lord has rejected the nation and severely disciplined her because of the abundance of her transgressions, however, he reverts to the character of God and the abundant mercy that flows from his covenant love for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. The Lord had driven the nation into grief, sorrow, and pain. The city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. The people of Judah were scattered, but this would not be the end of the story. Jeremiah had hope in the mercy of God. Millard Erickson contributes, “God’s mercy is his tenderhearted, loving compassion for his people. It is his tenderness of heart toward the needy. If grace contemplates humans as sinful, guilty, and condemned, mercy sees them as miserable and needy.”⁴¹ Because of his promises, the Lord had an obligation to rebuild the community. The overarching storyline of the Bible was not yet complete. A redeemer had been promised who would reveal the heart of God in the clearest sense. Outside the city gates of Jerusalem, the wise Son of

⁴⁰ Garrett, *Song of Songs, Lamentations*, 416–17.

⁴¹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 322.

God would hang upon a cross to provide a path of healing for the foolish idolaters in the nation of Israel and the entire world.

The Justice of God (Lam 3:34–36)

Due to their sin, the people of Judah became prisoners of war. Becoming a prisoner was an overwhelming and humiliating experience. Jeremiah explains it as being crushed underfoot (Lam 3:34). Kaiser expounds, “The kinds of malice men can heap on our heads are: cruel treatment of war captives and prisoners (v. 34), disregard for basic human rights (v. 35), and malpractice in the halls of justice (v. 36). The abuse of prisoners is a crime God will not condone.”⁴² Jeremiah’s appeal to God’s justice is good news for the oppressed. Erickson explicates, “The justice of God means that he administers his law fairly, not showing favoritism or partiality. Only a person’s acts, not his or her station in life, are considered in the assignment of consequences or rewards.”⁴³ Although prisoners, the people are made in the image of God and thereby possess dignity and worth. The people of Judah were more than a number in the Babylonian justice system and could find comfort in God Most High, who would hold both the captor and captive accountable for their actions.

The Sovereignty of God (Lam 3:37–39)

As Jeremiah laments, he knows who has brought calamity on the people of Judah. The Lord, Adonai, is the powerful Creator of the universe who spoke everything into existence and continues to rule over the affairs of men (Lam 3:37). In Judah’s case, the nation had experienced the goodness of God in his abundant blessings, but now the Most High, the Sovereign Lord over all the nations, displayed his goodness by allowing the Babylonians to destroy the temple of God, the palaces of Judah’s king and royal

⁴² Kaiser Jr., *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God*, 92.

⁴³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 315.

officials, and the walls of Jerusalem (Jer 52:13–15). All the false hopes of worshipping idols were exposed, and God’s goodness was meant to lead them to repentance (Rom 2:4). The Lord had not been pleased with formal religious practices. He desired the people to have a heart to be in personal relationship with him. Instead, the people of Judah had abandoned the Lord. For a time, the Lord removed his protection from the nation and allowed it to suffer the consequences of its sin. Hillers adds, “Even though the sense here is: ‘what his sins have brought on him’, this is the first time it is implied in the poem that the man’s troubles have been due to his own sins, that he should call into question not the goodness of God but his own goodness.”⁴⁴ Rather than complain about their calamity, both Jeremiah and the remnant of Judah should be thankful to be alive and able to humbly submit to the will and wisdom of God. Many people suffered due to the nation’s idolatry. Many families suffer today due to generational unfaithfulness to the Lord. Jeremiah had sought to please the Lord in calling the nation to repentance, and he was caught in the crosshairs of God’s judgment. He was a suffering servant who learned obedience through the things he suffered (Heb 5:7). All people, including inmates, would be wise to consider the relational brokenness sin creates and instead seek to please the Lord who is able to rebuild lives, families, churches, and communities that reflect his love and light in the world. Although Jeremiah identified with and suffered through the judgment of God on the nation’s sins, he possessed no power within himself to bring salvation to the nation. However, the Prophet of all prophets would be sent from heaven to overcome abandonment and provide redemption to all who believe.

The Gospel Reveals the Wise Son

God proclaimed the good news of the Redeemer on the day sin and death entered the world; thus, the world has been filled with the hope of the gospel from the

⁴⁴ Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, vol. 7a (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 72.

beginning (Gen 3:15; Col 1:23). Jesus Christ would enter the world through the virgin birth, but his birth in Bethlehem was not the beginning of his life. Jesus's prayer, as recorded by the apostle John, reveals, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24). Before the world came into existence, the Father and Son enjoyed an eternal relationship. James Boyce instructs,

God is revealed to us as the Father; not merely in the general way in which he is called the Father of all created beings, and they his sons; nor in that in which he is the Father of those who are his sons, in virtue of the adoption, which is in Christ Jesus; but the Father as indicative of a special relation between him and another person whom the Scriptures call his only begotten Son.⁴⁵

While Adam had been foolish by falling into temptation and disobedience to God, the last Adam, God's wise Son, would overcome sin and death and lead many sons to glory (1 Cor 15:45; Heb 2:10).

The Wise Son Walked through the Folly of This World

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, entered the world that was in opposition to his Father's wisdom, and his life of wisdom would be under attack from the start. Before Jesus was two years old, King Herod sought to destroy him in Bethlehem (Matt 2:13). Joseph, Jesus's legal father, obeyed the Lord and protected Jesus by moving to Egypt for a time before returning to Israel and settling in Nazareth. At age twelve, Jesus traveled to Jerusalem on Passover and was deeply interested in the things concerning his Father's house (Luke 2:41). The perfect Son of God would be in submission to his parents and grow in wisdom (Luke 2:51–52). Walter Leifeld explains, "To say Jesus 'grew in

⁴⁵ James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 125.

wisdom' does not detract from his deity."⁴⁶ Jesus would walk in wisdom through every stage of life.

The life of Jesus would be difficult, but he lived to bring delight to his Father in heaven. On two occasions, the Father spoke from heaven to affirm his Son (Matt 3:17; Matt 17:5). His relationship with his Father would be tested, and he was "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). He encountered the unbelief of the people, witnessed people settle for religious practices and idolatry instead of being in relationship with God, and knew many people were consumed with pursuing money rather than the glory of God (Matt 7:13; 16:26). Unbelief, false religion, and the love of money splintered the relationships God intended for man. Most of Jesus's community was led astray, but he continued to walk in wisdom.

The life Jesus lived was filled with suffering and grief. Solomon wrote, "For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (Eccl 1:18). Jesus was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa 53:3). He witnessed the misdirection of the people. Many of the people in Israel did not know God, and their ignorance of God caused problems in the home and community (Hosea 4:1-2; John 1:10). His community had missed the target of God's glory and chose to target him, the wise Son of God.

The Wise Son Experienced Abandonment from God and Man at the Cross

At the cross, Jesus displayed the intimacy he experienced with the Father. During his first cry, Jesus interceded, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). The desire of Jesus's heart for God-centered relationships is revealed in this statement. He had not committed any sin and did not need to ask forgiveness from

⁴⁶ Walter L. Liefeld, *Luke*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 852.

his Father during the last hours of his life. In addition, he had no reason to ask others for forgiveness because he had loved his Father supremely and his neighbor as himself. In this moment, he interceded on behalf of sinners who needed to be reconciled to God and to each other. During his last cry from the cross, Jesus exclaimed, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46). God the Father and the Son had enjoyed an unbroken relationship in eternity past and through Jesus’s entire earthly life except for a few dark hours on the cross.

Jesus was crucified by the Romans at nine in the morning (Mark 15:25). At noon, the sun failed to shine, and a darkness came over the land (Luke 23:45). Stuart Weber describes, “Creation mourned its Creator’s spiritual death (separation from his Father) and turned its back on the One the Father now turned away from because of the sin he became.”⁴⁷ The wise Son of God, a man greater than Solomon, was silent as he experienced the darkest hours of his life, and yet he was working to solve the most difficult dilemma in the universe by providing a way for holy God to be reconciled to foolish mankind through an ultimate act of sacrificial love (Matt 12:42).

Then, at three o’clock, Jesus gave his fourth cry from the cross. Leon Morris explains, “Speaking loudly as he did, Jesus evidently meant the words to be heard.”⁴⁸ Jesus exclaimed, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46). R. T. France elaborates, “This is not just a cry of pain, but an anguished appeal to God which reveals for a moment something of the mental and spiritual torment of the ‘cup’ Jesus had accepted in Gethsemane.”⁴⁹ Viewers of the cross often focus on Jesus’s physical agony, but his suffering went beyond the physical. Wayne

⁴⁷ Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 465.

⁴⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 720.

⁴⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1075.

Grudem explains, “He faced the weight of the guilt of millions of sins alone.”⁵⁰ Jesus endured relational brokenness by trusting in the character of God.

As the Great Shepherd was being smitten, the disciples, his sheep, were scattered (Zech 13:7; Matt 26:31). Jesus had spent three years teaching these men to walk closely with God, yet in his darkest hour, most of his spiritual brothers forsook him. Even Jesus’s natural family, his half-brothers and sisters, rejected his claims and felt he was out of his mind (Matt 13:55; Mark 3:21). Joseph, Jesus’s legal father, is not seen in the Gospels after Jesus’s trip to Jerusalem at age twelve. Daniel Browning, Jr., writes, “Joseph does not appear later in the Gospels, and it is likely that he died prior to Jesus’ public ministry.”⁵¹ The case can be argued that Jesus lost his earthly father before he was thirty years old. His mother Mary would be the only immediate family member who stood at the cross weeping and witnessing her son’s death (John 19:25). Jesus Christ endured the relational brokenness of his spiritual and biological families.

Further, the people in Jerusalem foolishly turned their back on the Son of God. Pilate presented to the crowd the perfect man, the last Adam, and a foolish man named Barnabas who was guilty of insurrection and murder (Luke 23:19; 1 Cor 15:45). The crowd heaped shame on Jesus and desired the murderer to be released rather than the life-giver. The Jewish and Roman justice systems were corrupt and broken, but God’s justice would be upheld by the Son of God on the cross, thereby opening a way of salvation for all who would believe. Ultimately, one criminal’s heart was changed by Jesus’s life-giving words, but the other criminal died with a hard heart (Luke 23:42–43). Jesus’s followers, family life, and community failed him in many ways, but relational brokenness did not hinder him, the wise Son, from pursuing relational wholeness by reconciling God and man.

⁵⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 712.

⁵¹ Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, eds., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Holman Bible, 2003), s.v. “Joseph,” (p. 949).

The fourth cry of Jesus was not “My people, my people, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus endured the injustice and shame of man, but the darkest moment of the cross was facing the justice of God on behalf of sinners (2 Cor 5:21). J. I. Packer defines sin, stating, “Sin may be comprehensively defined as lack of conformity to the law of God in act, habit, attitude, outlook, disposition, motivation, and mode of existence.”⁵² Since the great commandment is to love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, then sin is a failure to model mature love in relationship to God and others, which in turn leads to relational brokenness (Matt 22:37–40; 1 John 4:18). God’s justice system is not corrupt or broken, and sin—the failure to display godly love—must be punished. Nineteenth-century pastor and professor W. G. T. Shedd posited, “He may inflict the full amount of suffering due to sin either upon the sinner or upon a proper substitute.”⁵³ Jesus had modeled the Father’s perfect love and relational wholeness, thereby allowing him to become the substitute for sinners and the reconciler between God and man.

With sacrificial love, Jesus willingly laid down his life on behalf of sinners (John 10:18). Likewise, the Father sent his Son into the world as an act of love, but redemption would come at a high price (John 3:16). Jesus would reveal his glory through suffering. While hanging on the cross, Jesus quoted the first verse of Psalm 22 as he cried out to God in his suffering. R. T. France explains, “The expression ‘my God,’ while of course it is already provided by the psalm, nonetheless draws attention as a unique utterance by Jesus, who elsewhere in Matthew frequently refers to God as his Father but never as ‘my God,’ and who in prayer has used ‘Father’ to address God.”⁵⁴ At the cross,

⁵² J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 82.

⁵³ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Alan W. Gomes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 299.

⁵⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1076.

the Father and Son were separated for an unprecedented time. The Son was abandoned as he became a substitute for sinners. John Goldingay states, “Abandonment lies in failing to act on the suppliant’s behalf.”⁵⁵ Out of love, the Father offered up his Son, while the Son, out of love, was giving his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). The three persons of the Godhead were giving, loving, and uniquely experiencing the price of redemption. Leon Morris expounds, “When we put such passages of Scripture together, it seems that in the working out of salvation for sinners the hitherto unbroken communion between the Father and the Son was mysteriously broken.”⁵⁶ Though Jesus Christ experienced the weight of sin, he did not lose faith. France adds, “But it is surely also significant that Jesus, like the abandoned psalmist, still addresses God as ‘my God;’ this shout expresses not a loss of faith, but a (temporary) loss of contact.”⁵⁷ The Father and Son’s fellowship was temporarily broken as they worked together to atone for sin and establish the eternal covenant of grace that could never be broken (Heb 13:20).

Jesus’s experience of abandonment was excruciating. Donald Hagner clarifies, “It may fairly be said that it was whatever occurred here—this breach with his Father (although the prayer avoids this intimate term, using simply ‘God’)—and not the excruciating pain or ignominious death of crucifixion that Jesus dreaded above all else.”⁵⁸ D. A. Carson summarizes the worst pain of the cross: “Jesus is conscious of being abandoned by his Father.”⁵⁹ Jesus knows the grief of sin and physical and spiritual death. He drank the cup of humanity’s selfishness and knows the loneliness it creates (Prov

⁵⁵ John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 1, *Psalms 1–41*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 326.

⁵⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 721–22.

⁵⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1076–77.

⁵⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33b (Dallas: Word, 1995), 844.

⁵⁹ D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 579.

18:1; 2 Tim 3:2). He felt disconnected from his relationship with the Father and separated from humanity. David Turner asserts,

With the cry of abandonment, Jesus does not lose faith but expresses the depths of his unimaginable pain at being abandoned by his Father. He must drink the cup of suffering that the Father has given him, leading to the unfathomable agony of being abandoned by the Father. He must die in order to pour out his blood as a ransom so as to save his people from their sins. Yet his abandonment is only temporary, and his vindication will come soon.⁶⁰

The light of the Father’s countenance turned away from him for a moment, and he experienced the pain of outer darkness (Num 6:26; Matt 22:13). Hagner summarizes, “This is one of the most impenetrable mysteries of the entire Gospel narrative.”⁶¹ Both Christ’s suffering and glory are difficult to comprehend, but both should lead to holy awe and worship.

The question Jesus posed on the cross is one that many sufferers cry in times of pain and death. F. F. Bruce recommends, “It is not for us to rush in with an answer to our Lord’s question, since he left it unanswered himself; but his use of this psalm established its recognition in the church as a principal Old Testament ‘testimony’ of his passion and triumph.”⁶² Jesus had remained sinless, and in his darkest hour, he cried out to God in faith. Craig Evans reasons, “Jesus has not lost his faith in God, as the twofold address, ‘My God, my God,’ implies, but he feels utterly abandoned.”⁶³ Though Jesus felt deserted, he directed his heart by faith with the truth of Scripture. He knew his Father loved him and his work on the cross. Comparing the difference between the wicked and Christ, Hodges asserts, “The loss of the divine favour produces in them hatred, venting

⁶⁰ David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 669.

⁶¹ Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 845.

⁶² F. F. Bruce, *Matthew*, Open Your Bible Commentary (Bath, England: Creative 4 International, 2014), s.v. “Mt 27:45–54.”

⁶³ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 34b (Dallas: Word, 2001), 507.

itself in blasphemies (Rev. 16:10, 11), but in Christ it produced the most earnest longing after the light of God's countenance, and entire submission, in the midst of the depressing and overwhelming darkness."⁶⁴ Jesus Christ's heart remained holy and consumed with the glory of God. He did not give up on God's patterns for relationships. Jesus overcame the power of sin and the suffering of abandonment, and his life provided an example for everyone to follow.

As the only true and righteous sufferer, Jesus Christ is the one whom all mankind needs to follow. Though Jeremiah was faithful to God through his representative suffering, Jeremiah was a sinner. Kaiser adds, "And because he suffered representatively as God's delegated sufferer he mirrors perfectly, and by divine design, another prophet who would one day also suffer as did the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 52:13–53:12."⁶⁵ Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all the Law and the Prophets and is both the Son of God and Son of Man (Rom 3:21). In describing the union of the two natures of Christ, seventeenth-century Puritan theologian John Owen wrote, "There are in him, in his one single individual person, two distinct natures; the one, eternal, infinite, immense, almighty—the form and essence of God; the other, having a beginning in time, finite, limited, confined unto a certain place—which is our nature, which he took on him when he was 'made flesh, and dwelt among us.'"⁶⁶ A proper substitute for sinners would have to be able to represent both God and man, and Jesus Christ is the only person able to meet these requirements (1 Tim 2:5).

Divine justice had not been satisfied through the bloodshed of the bulls and goats throughout the Old Testament sacrificial system (Heb 9:14; 10:4). The best mankind had to offer through animal sacrifices was not sufficient. However, God would

⁶⁴ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 615.

⁶⁵ Kaiser Jr., *Grief and Pain in the Plan of God*, 79.

⁶⁶ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 1, *The Glory of Christ*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862), 310.

provide the Lamb of God who could take away sins (John 1:29; 1 Pet 1:18–20). Puritan pastor Stephen Charnock expounded, “And since no other blood had a sufficiency in it to quench the flames of his justice, God would single out the best blood in the whole creation wherewith to satisfy it; a blood though created, yet the blood of the Creator. Never could earth or hell read such a lecture of divine justice as in this case.”⁶⁷ A righteous sacrifice would have to be made to atone for sin. Jesus, the God-man, came into the world to accomplish redemption, but the redemption of vile sinners would come at an extreme cost. It would require the sinless life of the beloved Son of God. Stephen Wellum, professor of Christian theology at Southern Seminary, explains that “according to the apostolic understanding, the nature and goal of Jesus’s emptying himself was to place God the Son incarnate on a cross, willingly and obediently enduring not only the burden of human weakness and sin but also the full weight of the Father’s divine wrath with all its physical, spiritual, and relational agony.”⁶⁸ Jesus would experience relational brokenness like no other human being. Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck stressed,

He, with his holy nature, lived through it as no sinful person can; he took the cup into his hand and—voluntarily—emptied it to the last drop. By the power of love, he laid down life itself and, fully conscious and with a firm will, entered the valley of the shadow of death. There he was, and felt, forsaken by God, so that in precisely that fashion he might be able to taste death for everyone (Heb. 2:9).⁶⁹

In the depths of his agony, he expressed the cry of dereliction. Twentieth-century Baptist minister and author Arthur Pink expounded, “It was a cry of distress but not of distrust.”⁷⁰ In his humanity, Jesus Christ was conscious of the Father’s

⁶⁷ Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864–66), 150.

⁶⁸ Stephen Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 178.

⁶⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 390.

⁷⁰ Arthur Walkington Pink, *The Seven Sayings of the Saviour on the Cross* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), 94.

abandonment, but he was secured by his Father's love. Shedd clarified,

Though the Father "smote," "wounded," and "bruised" the Son, he felt no emotional anger toward the person of the Son. The emotional wrath of God is revealed only against personal unrighteousness, and Christ was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. The Father smote his "beloved Son, in whom he was well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). At the very instant when the Father forsook the Son, he loved him emotionally and personally with the same infinite affection with which he had loved him "before the world was." When it is said that Christ experienced the "wrath of God," the meaning is that he experienced a judicial suffering caused by God. The "wrath" of God in this instance is not a divine emotion, but a divine act by which God the Father caused pain in Jesus Christ for a particular purpose.⁷¹

Jesus drank the bitter cup of God's wrath down to the dregs (Matt 26:42).

Baptist minister and theologian A. H. Strong explained, "In other words, as Christ was man, the penalty due to human guilt belonged to him to bear; but, as he was God, he could exhaust that penalty, and could be a proper substitute for others."⁷² Jesus Christ's sacrifice makes him an all-sufficient Savior.

Finally, the righteous sufferer, Jesus Christ, is the person who all mankind must look to for salvation and follow to be an overcomer (Heb 12:2). Wellum declares,

By his incarnation and cross work, the Son becomes our victor who wins the battle, and apart from this there is no salvation. Our plight is so desperate due to sin that it requires nothing less than the enfleshment of God's own unique Son. His humanity cannot be an appearance; it must be genuine and full to bring forth the glory of a new humanity.⁷³

Jesus has the power to make a sinner a brand-new human being. He has gained the victory over sin and death. Eighteen-century Baptist minister and theologian Andrew Fuller summarized the events of Christ's sufferings and temptations as being orchestrated in such a way "that he might grapple as it were single-handed with the powers of darkness, and that to him might be given the whole glory of the victory."⁷⁴ Because Jesus

⁷¹ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 718–19.

⁷² Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 762.

⁷³ Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 223.

⁷⁴ Andrew Gunton Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, vol. 3, *Expositions-Miscellaneous*, ed. Joseph Belcher (1845; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1988), 734–73.

Christ was forsaken, all who turn to him in repentance and faith can be accepted in the Beloved forever. As a result, the redeemed will give him honor and glory forever and ever (Jude 1:25).

The Wise Son Overcame the Impact of Abandonment and Promised to Be with His People Forever

Jesus finished the work of redemption he had come to accomplish and committed his life into the hands of his Father (Luke 23:46; John 19:30). The Father would honor his Son in burial. On the third day, Jesus's wise and righteous sacrifice was vindicated through his resurrection from the dead. Jesus overcame the impact of abandonment and restored his disciples to useful ministry.

The Good Shepherd had not given up on his disciples. His love for them had remained, and he regathered them on a mountain in Galilee and gave them the Great Commission (Matt 28:16). He authorized the church to go into the whole world with a message of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). Because of Jesus's mediatorial work, the spiritually lost could be brought back into a relationship with the Father and taught to pursue relational wholeness in marriage, family, church, and community (Matt 28:19). The mission of Jesus was to bring people back to the Father's heart, and the kingdom of his dear Son would clash with the domain of darkness, leading to conversions and persecution (Col 1:13; 2 Tim 3:12).

Jesus concluded his commission to the disciples with a promise. Craig Blomberg posits, "Despite the Great Commission, Matthew wants to end his Gospel centering more on Christ's attributes than on the disciples' task. Verses 18–20 link back with 1:23 to frame the entire Gospel with references to Immanuel—*God with us*."⁷⁵ Jesus promised never to abandon his disciples, those who follow him into the darkness of the

⁷⁵ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 432.

world with the difficult task of making disciples. He promised he would never leave them and would be with them now and forever.

Throughout this chapter, a biblical and theological foundation has been established to help inmates at TTCC overcome the impact of abandonment by gaining an understanding of the patterned life of a wise son, the brokenness and hope demonstrated in the life of Jeremiah, and the perfect example of Jesus, who overcame the impact of abandonment by faith and calls people to follow him in discipleship as a delight to the Father's heart.

CHAPTER 3
PRACTICAL ISSUES CONCERNING INMATES
OVERCOMING THE IMPACT
OF ABANDONMENT

The prison system overflows with individuals who are suffering relational brokenness. Perhaps many inmates have come from broken homes, and now, due to their incarceration, another parent, spouse, child, or friend experiences the pain and separation from family members. E. Ann Carson reports for the Bureau of Justice Statistics: “In 2020, the number of persons held in state or federal prisons in the United States declined 15%, from 1,430,200 at yearend 2019 to 1,215,800 at yearend 2020.”¹ Many victims and family members are impacted by the incarceration of 1.2 million men and women. Most inmates are housed in state and private facilities. The United States Department of Justice reports, “Among all prisoners in confinement facilities at midyear 2019, about 82% were in state, 11% were in federal, and 7% were in private facilities.”² Trousdale Turner Correctional Center, the focus of this ministry research project, is a medium-security prison operated by CoreCivic in partnership with the State of Tennessee.

The Tennessee Department of Corrections oversees over 50,000 men and women. The costs of incarceration are astronomical. From a financial perspective, the TDOC explains, “The department’s total operating budget for Fiscal Year 2021 was

¹ E. Ann Carson, *Prisoners in 2020-Statistic Tables*, BJS Report, NCJ 302776 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2021), 1, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/prisoners-2020-statistical-tables>.

² Laura M. Maruschak and Emily D. Buehler, *Census of State and Federal Adult Correctional Facilities, 2019 – Statistical Tables*, BJS Report, NCJ 301366 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2021), 2, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/census-state-and-federal-adult-correctional-facilities-2019-statistical-tables>.

\$1,119,637,200.”³ Criminal activity also costs families, communities, and government much more than can be quantified in dollars. Further expenditures of injustice include broken relationships, unsafe communities, and lost contributions to future generations. These rising costs necessitate change.

This chapter addresses practical issues concerning inmates at TTCC by asking two vital questions. First, what unique challenges do inmates face? This chapter argues that an inmate’s four major challenges are recidivism, addiction, abandonment, and employment. Second, what do inmates need? The answer to this question includes repentance, reconciliation, renewal, and reintegration. If an inmate can honestly ask these two questions and answer them appropriately, he can be transformed and make a positive contribution to society.

What Unique Challenges Do Inmates Face?

When a man commits a crime and is sentenced to time in prison as an inmate, he has created for himself unique challenges to overcome. An inmate now has a criminal record with the county, state, or federal government. His actions have impacted fellow citizens of the community. Family members are separated from the inmate. In some cases, the separation may provide relief from the risky or reckless behavior of the criminal. Financial issues such as fines, fees, and child support continue to accrue. An inmate faces a host of problems. Most problems are the consequences for their actions; nevertheless, an inmate faces unique challenges in preparation to reenter society. Four challenges include recidivism, addiction, abandonment, and employment.

Recidivism

Recidivism is defined as “the percentage of felony inmates who are re-

³ TDOC, *Annual Report, Fiscal Year 2021* (Nashville: State of Tennessee, 2021), 5, <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/correction/documents/AnnualReport2021.pdf>.

incarcerated within three years of their release.”⁴ Recidivism is also referred to as the revolving door of the prison. The criminal justice system considers the work of prisons and prison programs successful if the offender does not return to prison. Though remaining out of prison indicates some level of change, recidivism rates alone cannot be an accurate measure of changed lives. The problem is deeper than a behavioral issue.

Recidivism rates have been a concern of the criminal justice system for centuries. The *British Journal of Criminology* states, “Even as early as 1917 investigations have been carried out to get more insight into the question as to why some delinquents relapse into crime while others do not.”⁵ For years, researchers have questioned what causes an inmate who has been locked up in unfavorable circumstances to recommit a crime and return to prison. From a man-centered behavioral perspective, the world remains perplexed; however, the question has a sufficient answer, which will be addressed under the section of what an inmate needs.

Many studies have tracked inmates who have been released from prison. These studies tell an interesting story and indicate the need for better solutions within the criminal justice system. A study performed in a nine-year period from 2005 to 2014 indicated, “Five in six (83%) state prisoners released in 2005 across thirty states were arrested at least once during the nine years following their release.”⁶ Based on this study, eight out of ten former inmates reoffended within a nine-year period. A more recent five-year study was conducted between 2012 to 2017. Matthew Durose and Leonardo Antenangeli state, “About 6 in 10 (62%) prisoners released across 34 states in 2012 were

⁴ TDOC, “Tennessee Recidivism Rate Shows Promising Decrease,” last modified April 20, 2017, <https://www.tn.gov/correction/news/2017/4/20/tdoc-tennessee-recidivism-rate-shows-promising-decrease.html>.

⁵ W. Buikhuisen and H. A. Hoekstra, “Factors Related to Recidivism,” *British Journal of Criminology* 14, no. 1 (1974): 63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23636091>.

⁶ Mariel Alper, Matthew R. Durose, and Joshua Markman, *2018 Update on Prisoner Recidivism: A 9-Year Follow-up Period (2005-2014)*, BJS Report, NCJ 250975 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2018), 1, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/18upr9yfup0514.pdf>.

arrested within 3 years, and 7 in 10 (71%) were arrested within 5 years.”⁷ Within three years of release, the majority of former inmates re-offend. Durose and Antenangeli add, “Nearly 8 in 10 (79%) prisoners released in 2012 had been admitted to prison for a new court commitment, while just under 2 in 10 (18%) had been admitted for violating their conditional release to the community on parole or probation.”⁸ These statistics reflect how difficult it is for former inmates to break the cycle of crime.

Another study tracked former inmates from twenty-four different states for ten years, from 2008 to 2018. Antenangeli and Durose report, “About 66% of prisoners released across 24 states in 2008 were arrested within 3 years, and 82% were arrested within 10 years.”⁹ Based on research, two out of three former inmates will return to prison within three years. In the State of Tennessee, the numbers fare somewhat better. Damon Hininger, CEO of CoreCivic, shares, “And while Tennessee’s recidivism rate is lower than the national average, half of those released from incarceration in our state still end up back in the criminal justice system. We have a moral, social and economic obligation to do more.”¹⁰ The numbers expose a daunting challenge for ex-offenders, and the criminal justice system must work towards better solutions.

Recidivism rates reveal the high chances of reoffending, but the numbers also indicate a threat to families of the incarcerated and the general public. Children who experience a parent enter the criminal justice system are more like to follow their parent’s

⁷ Matthew R. Durose and Leonardo Antenangeli, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 34 States in 2012: A 5-Year Follow-Up Period (2012–2017)*, BJS Report, NCJ 255947 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2021), 1, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/recidivism-prisoners-released-34-states-2012-5-year-follow-period-2012-2017>.

⁸ Durose and Antenangeli, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 34 States in 2012*, 2.

⁹ Leonardo Antenangeli and Matthew R. Durose, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 24 States in 2008: A 10-Year Follow-Up Period (2008–2018)*, BJS Report, NCJ 256094 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2021), 1, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/recidivism-prisoners-released-24-states-2008-10-year-follow-period-2008-2018>.

¹⁰ Damon Hininger, “Tennessee Is Setting a New Standard on Recidivism,” *The Tennessean*, May 29, 2019, <https://amp.tennessean.com/amp/1264744001>.

pattern. Eric Martin declares, “There is particular concern that a parent’s imprisonment will lead to a cycle of intergenerational criminal behavior. One statistic indicates that children of incarcerated parents are, on average, six times more likely to become incarcerated themselves.”¹¹ Individual families are impacted, but the problem does not stop there. The public becomes less safe. Matt Dummermuth writes, “High rates of recidivism greatly impact public safety and the victims affected by those new crimes, as well as the lives of offenders who are unable to break out of the cycle of repeat offending.”¹² Continuous criminal activity devastates the lives of the perpetrator and the victims, and more needs to be done inside prisons, during reentry to society, and beyond. Liz Benecchi agrees, stating, “The country’s high recidivism rate alone demonstrates that our prisons are as ineffective as they are inefficient, a sobering reality which calls for a reimagined criminal justice system.”¹³ Without a doubt, inmates need more than to be placed behind fences with razor wire. An inmate needs hope that he can break the cycle.

When inmates hear recidivism numbers, they are tempted to question whether anything can ever change. Once a man enters the system, former inmates understand how difficult it is to find a way of escape. Tempted to return to the same friends and pursue the same behaviors, many men give up the fight to resist. Men of Valor has recognized this problem. Hininger explains, “Men of Valor first begins to mentor men inside our facilities before picking them up at the gates upon their release and providing them with ongoing support and counseling, housing, clothing, job opportunities and what they need for a

¹¹ Eric Martin, “Hidden Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children,” *National Institute of Justice Journal* 278 (May 2017): 2, <https://nij.gov/journals/278/Pages/impact-of-incarceration-on-dependent-children.aspx>.

¹² Matt Dummermuth, “Reducing Recidivism in Released Offenders Improves Public Safety,” Office of Justice Programs (blog), June 10, 2019, <https://www.ojp.gov/files/archives/blogs/2019/reducing-recidivism-released-offenders-improves-public-safety/>.

¹³ Liz Benecchi, “Recidivism Imprisons American Progress,” *Harvard Political Review*, last modified August 8, 2021, <https://harvardpolitics.com/recidivism-american-progress/>.

successful reentry into our communities.”¹⁴ An inmate needs help to do something he has never done to be someone he has never been. Hininger adds, “Compared to the national 75% recidivism rate, fewer than 15% of the inmates who work with Men of Valor return to jail or prison.”¹⁵ Hope for change is alive, but the road may be hard.

Addiction

The drug culture has a powerful impact on men inside and outside of the prison. Human beings are made for relationships; however, many suffer with relational problems. Instead of working through problems, people seek to escape pain or pursue pleasure through immoral means. One escape many men choose prior to incarceration involves drugs or substance abuse. Over time, the escape to drugs or substances becomes its own form of bondage. Mark Shaw explains, “Quite simply, physical addiction occurs when you repeatedly satisfy a natural appetite and desire with a temporary pleasure until you become the servant of the temporary object of pleasure rather than its master.”¹⁶ Addiction creates a problem outside the prison, and it also remains prevalent within the prison system.

Ed Welch describes addiction as “bondage to the rule of a substance, activity, or state of mind, which then becomes the center of life, defending itself from the truth so that even bad consequences don’t bring repentance, and leading to further estrangement

¹⁴ Damon Hininger, “Tennessee Is Setting a New Standard on Recidivism.”

¹⁵ Hininger, “Tennessee Is Setting a New Standard on Recidivism.” Tommy Mathis, Admissions Director at Men of Valor Prison Ministry, maintains records for inmates who participate in aftercare. From 2009 until 2021, there have been 167 ex-offenders who have stayed six months in MOV aftercare and 39 returned to prison within three years of release (23.4 percent). During the same time frame, 82 ex-offenders graduated the twelve-month program and 11 recidivated (13.4 percent). Men of Valor has grown exponentially since opening a new campus called Valor Ridge in September 2018. For example, in 2017, 27 men participated in aftercare. In 2021, 156 men arrived at Valor Ridge. Many men participate for a short time; however, MOV graduates invest twelve months in learning more about Jesus, living in community, rebuilding relationships, and maintaining employment. As a result, graduates have less than a 15 percent recidivism rate.

¹⁶ Mark Shaw, *The Heart of Addiction: A Biblical Perspective* (Bemidji, MN: Focus, 2008), 27.

from God.”¹⁷ Secular sources overlook a person’s need to know and love God. Instead of knowing and being dependent on God, the addict allows the substance to become the center of one’s life. Stanton Peele posits, “Individuals can come to depend on such an experience for their basic psychic wellbeing, even if it is detrimental to their overall health and life satisfaction. No gene for addiction or specific addictive neurochemical pathway can explain this process, which comprises an all-encompassing reliance on an experience.”¹⁸ Based on Welch’s definition, the addict becomes ruled by a drug or substance. Both the biological and spiritual components of man become enslaved to an experience. Timothy Lane adds, “Scripture tells us that the inner person (the heart) and what it craves, treasures, wants, fears and lives for is the ultimate driver of addictive behavior.”¹⁹ The addict desires physical and psychological pleasure, denies the truth, and continues to repeat his actions despite relational consequences with God and others.

When an addict becomes willing to pursue drugs and substances with reckless abandon, his selfishness creates many victims. In fact, the U.S. Department of Justice reports, “The evidence indicates that drug users are more likely than nonusers to commit crimes, that arrestees and inmates were often under the influence of a drug at the time they committed their offense, and that drug trafficking generates violence.”²⁰ Addiction and crime are intricately connected both in the United States and beyond. Charles Hynes states, “One-third of state prisoners reported that they had committed their current offense

¹⁷ Edward T. Welch, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave: Finding Hope in the Power of the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2001), 35.

¹⁸ Stanton Peele, “Addiction Myths,” *RSA Journal* 158, no. 5549 (2012): 23, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26204086>.

¹⁹ Timothy Lane, “Godly Intoxication: The Church Can Minister to Addicts,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26, no. 2 (2012): 5.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Justice, *Fact Sheet: Drug-Related Crime*, BJS Report, NCJ 149286 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 1994), 3, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/fact-sheet-drug-related-crime>.

while under the influence of drugs.”²¹ These reports describe the problem of addiction prior to incarceration; however, the problem does not stop once a man is incarcerated.

While prison systems provide drug treatment programs, more must be done to break the addictive cycle that breeds hopelessness. Welch explains, “Addicts feel out of control, enslaved, stuck, and without hope for freedom or escape. Something or someone other than the living God controls them, and the controlling object tells them how to live, think, and feel.”²² A person who becomes incarcerated may escape his previous settings, but drugs are easily obtained within the prison walls. The addict needs an environment where temptations are removed. Peel writes, “Addiction can ease if the individual develops better coping mechanisms or leaves behind disastrous settings.”²³ The problem is that an inmate has a difficult time escaping the drug culture within the prison.

As recently as December 2021, the Colorado State Prison System struggled to address the issue of drugs and addiction. Jesse Paul reports, “Daigle said prisoners have been instructing their family members to buy a special kind of paper with high cotton content and then spray it with an oil containing synthetic cannabinoids, colloquially known as ‘spice.’ The oil is colorless and odorless and can’t be detected during the mail-screening process.”²⁴ Drugs enter the prison in creative ways, and the number of overdoses and deaths within prisons continues to increase. Carson observes, “From 2001 to 2019, the number of deaths by drug or alcohol intoxication grew 623% and homicides increased 267%, compared to an increase of 34% for the total number of deaths during

²¹ Charles J. Hynes, “Better Than Prison: A Prosecutor’s Collaborative Models for Reducing Criminal Recidivism,” *Human Rights* 36, no. 2 (2009): 16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25761997>.

²² Welch, *Addictions*, 12.

²³ Peele, “Addiction Myths,” 23.

²⁴ Jesse Paul, “A Lot More Drugs Are Being Confiscated from Colorado Prisons as Inmates Die from Overdose,” *The Colorado Sun*, December 13, 2021, <https://coloradosun.com/2021/12/13/drugs-colorado-prisons-overdoses/>.

this period.”²⁵ If state prisons fail to secure the prison by preventing contraband, the problem of addiction will continue. Instead of becoming sober, an inmate can continue the same addictive practices that led them to prison.

An inmate can escape the deadly maze of addiction, but he must be willing to be honest about the desires of his heart. He must take ownership of his actions. David Powlison writes, “Somehow, in the way God runs his universe, our willingness to enter into the experience of pain, disappointment, loneliness, hurt, and stress—being willing to face it and not bolt for some lesser pleasure—winds up being the door to the greatest pleasure of all. And with the best come all the other true pleasures, felt deeply.”²⁶ Many inmates do not understand God’s desire to be in relationship with them. Many fail to understand the nature of sin or how a father or mother could lack natural affection and abandon them. Many do not understand the rebellion of their own hearts. Freedom can be found. Robert Jones remarks, “Despite the claims of our culture, at its core, addiction is not a medical problem. It’s a heart problem, the problem of enslaving sin (John 8:34). We find the answer to it in the freeing power of the Son, his Word, and his Spirit (John 8:32, 36; 2 Cor 3:17)—in this life and ultimately in the better life to come.”²⁷ For most inmates, the road ahead will be filled with varying degrees of suffering, but with God all things are possible (Matt 19:26b).

Abandonment

Incarceration exposes the relational brokenness in an inmate’s life. Upon arrest, a criminal’s removal from society and placement into the criminal justice system

²⁵ E. Ann Carson, *Mortality in State and Federal Prisons, 2001–2019, Statistical Tables*, BJS Report, NCJ 300953 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2021), 2, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/mortality-state-and-federal-prisons-2001-2019-statistical-tables>.

²⁶ David Powlison, *Breaking the Addictive Cycle: Deadly Obsessions or Sinful Pleasures* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010), 15.

²⁷ Robert D. Jones, Kristin L. Kellen, and Rob Green, *The Gospel for Disordered Lives: An Introduction to Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2021), 347.

separates the individual from relational structures. A man's arrest and incarceration immediately impact all the relationships in his life. Often, trust is broken, and pain ensues. David Blankenhorn comments, "Death kills men but sustains fatherhood. Abandonment sustains men but kills fatherhood. Death is more personally final, but departure is more culturally lethal. From a societal perspective, the former is an individual tragedy. The latter is a cultural tragedy."²⁸ In some cases, abandonment could be described as a living death. In an article on the effects of absenteeism, the authors emphasize that "separation as a result of parental incarceration may be even more detrimental than divorce and other forms of parent-child separation."²⁹ Whether or not the inmate expresses the pain of separation, other people in his circle become immersed in suffering the temporary loss of a loved one due to his criminal activity.

Based on statistics, many state prisoners are perpetuating broken relationships. Lauren Beatty and Tracy Snell note, "In 2016, most prisoners in the United States reported growing up in a home with at least one parent: 35% reported that they primarily lived with both parents, while 47% grew up in a single-parent home, primarily with their mother (41%)."³⁰ One out of three inmates lived within a nuclear family, while almost half of the inmates lived with only one parent. Beatty and Snell add, "In 2016, the majority of all prisoners in the United States reported that they had never married (58%). State prisoners were more likely to report that they had never married (59%) than to report being divorced (19%), married (14%), separated (5%), or widowed (3%)."³¹ Since many inmates have never married, many children are birthed into homes with cracked

²⁸ David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Harper, 1996), 24.

²⁹ Amanda Geller et al., "Beyond Absenteeism: Father Incarceration and Child Development," *Demography* 49, no. 1 (2012): 51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41408219>.

³⁰ Lauren G. Beatty and Tracy L. Snell, *Profile of Prison Inmates, 2016*, BJS Report, NCJ 255037 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2021), 20, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/profile-prison-inmates-2016>.

³¹ Beatty and Snell, *Profile of Prison Inmates, 2016*, 6.

foundations.

When a parent is not in the home due to incarceration, this absence creates added pressure on the survivor parent or on social services to meet additional needs. Joyce Arditti, Jennifer Lambert-Shute, and Karen Joest explain, “We wondered how children were faring under these conditions, because they had to contend both with the primary loss of a parent and changes in their relationship with the survivor parent, and because most survivor parents were poor and overwhelmed with responsibilities.”³² Often overlooked, the survivor parent becomes the sole provider for children. While having to work to make ends meet, children may be further neglected. Philip Genty observes, “Unlike other collateral consequences, family separation has an irreversible impact upon both parents and children. The time apart is lost forever, because a childhood can never be recovered.”³³ The loss of one parent to incarceration can lead to the loss of another parent’s time and involvement to provide the necessary resources for a child. Everyone suffers, and the cost to future generations continues to rise.

While an inmate remains in prison, family relationships, although strained, remain a vital part of his success in prison and during post-release. David Best observes, “Family attachments during a prison sentence can be crucial for managing the pressures of prison life, providing hope for when the prisoner is released, and in offering essential support during the resettlement process in the period immediately after release from prison.”³⁴ Some inmates have family members who continue to support them, while others are further estranged. In an article on hardship after prison, sociologist Bruce Western and his colleagues report that “long sentences and long histories of incarceration

³² Joyce A. Arditti, Jennifer Lambert-Shute, and Karen Joest, “Saturday Morning at the Jail: Implications of Incarceration for Families and Children,” *Family Relations* 52, no. 3 (2003): 201, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3700270>.

³³ Philip Genty, “Damage to Family Relationships as a Collateral Consequence of Parental Incarceration,” *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 30, no. 5 (2003): 1671.

³⁴ David Best, *Pathways to Recovery and Desistance: The Role of the Social Contagion of Hope* (Bristol, England: Bristol University Press, 2019), 71.

are likely to impede social integration by weakening family ties and socializing inmates into the routines and interactions of prison life.”³⁵ Depending on the length of the incarceration, many men become more comfortable with prison life and living alone even when surrounded by hundreds of other men.

Rebuilding community must be a priority of an inmate. Challenges abound post-release, but ruined relationships can be restored in time. Bruce Western and Natalie Smith contend, “Living with housing insecurity, often in the grip of addiction, and managing time and relationships with several partners are objective barriers to positive parenting for even the most committed mothers and fathers newly released from prison.”³⁶ Overcoming abandonment requires resolve to persevere in righteousness and patience. Most family members and friends want to see if the formerly incarcerated can be trusted. Trust remains a foundational element to any relationship.

Employment

An inmate who desires to succeed post-release needs to be proactive with his time in prison. Torbjorn Skardhamar and Kjetil Telle note, “It has long been recognized that inmates usually face major problems upon release from prison, and the post-release situation likely has major implications for recidivism.”³⁷ Inmates must plan ahead for ways to provide for themselves post release. Before addressing the need for employment, Richard Freeman notes, “There is a potentially even deeper supply side problem: a disproportionate share of inmates have medical problems likely to impair their ability to work in the job market.”³⁸ An inmate who has medical issues must consider his post-

³⁵ Bruce Western et al., “Stress and Hardship after Prison,” *American Journal of Sociology* 120, no. 5 (2015): 1516, <https://doi.org/10.1086/681301>.

³⁶ Bruce Western and Natalie Smith, “Formerly Incarcerated Parents and Their Children,” *Demography* 55, no. 3 (2018): 842, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45048010>.

³⁷ Torbjørn Skardhamar and Kjetil Telle, “Post-Release Employment and Recidivism in Norway,” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 28, no. 4 (2012): 630, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43551948>.

³⁸ Richard Freeman, “Can We Close the Revolving Door? Recidivism vs. Employment of Ex-

release options for social services.

Inmates who are physically able to work must consider two important elements: physical health and education. First, most inmates have a considerable amount of time to maintain personal physical health. Some inmates contend that food inside the prison is high in carbohydrates, cheaply made, and makes it difficult to maintain a healthy diet. Nevertheless, an inmate needs to consider his marketable skills, which would include the physical ability to maintain a job. Second, most prisons like TTCC provide educational opportunities. Beaty and Snell mention, “More than 6 in 10 state prisoners had not completed high school (62%), and less than 1 in 4 had obtained a high school degree (23%).”³⁹ Without marketable skills, inmates will find it problematic to find and keep a job in today’s market; therefore, inmates need to take advantage of vocational training, educational opportunities, and other means to help them increase their skills and prepare for employment.

In addition to improving marketable skills, inmates must understand the fears of the general public and be prepared to live a life above reproach. Freeman reminds, “Some employers cannot legally hire persons with criminal records for some jobs. Other employers eschew ex-offenders for fear that customers or other workers would sue them if the ex-offender harmed them during work activities.”⁴⁰ Risk tolerance determines the ability of many employers to hire ex-offenders. Lucius Couloute and Daniel Kopf articulate, “Although employers express willingness to hire people with criminal records, evidence shows that having a record reduces employer callback rates by 50%.”⁴¹

Offenders in the U.S.” (paper presented at the Urban Institute Reentry Roundtable, New York University Law School, May 19–20, 2003).

³⁹ Beaty and Snell, *Profile of Prison Inmates*, 2016, 6.

⁴⁰ Freeman, “Can We Close the Revolving Door?”

⁴¹ Lucius Couloute and Daniel Kopf, “Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment among Formerly Incarcerated People,” Prison Policy Initiative, last modified July 1, 2018, 2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27307>.

Employers who hire ex-offenders understand the risk; therefore, the ex-offender needs to take advantage of the opportunity to demonstrate his work ethic. In so doing, he may have the opportunity to pave the way for other inmates to work at the same employer.

One key element for ex-offenders involves finding the right employer. Couloute and Kopf report, “Among working-age individuals (25–44 in this dataset), the unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated people was 27.3%, compared with just 5.2% unemployment for their general public peers.”⁴² To the inmate, these numbers are a discouraging reminder of the difficulty of securing employment. Rejection from employers can provide a temptation to return to what an ex-offender may consider an easier path to securing necessary resources for survival. Skardhamar and Telle explain, “If the expected returns from licit work decline or the expected returns from crime increase, then illicit income opportunities become relatively more attractive.”⁴³ Therefore, maintaining employment becomes a major element in reducing recidivism rates.

The ex-offender will need help to rebuild his life. Crystal Yang emphasizes the necessity of some governmental assistance: “Eligibility for welfare and food stamps significantly decreases recidivism among newly released drug offenders, potentially because public assistance helps ex-offenders make ends meet when other economic prospects are dire.”⁴⁴ In Tennessee, many men are released from prison with a change of clothes, a white mesh bag, and little direction for the future. Without additional assistance from family, the community, or churches to help in the reintegration effort after release, many men do not have the motivation to change their lifestyles. Couloute and Kopf observe, “We also find that unemployment is highest within the first two years of release,

⁴² Couloute and Kopf, “Out of Prison & Out of Work,” 2.

⁴³ Skardhamar and Telle, “Post-Release Employment and Recidivism in Norway,” 631.

⁴⁴ Crystal S. Yang, “Does Public Assistance Reduce Recidivism?” *American Economic Review* 107, no. 5 (2017): 554, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44250459>.

suggesting that pre- and post-release employment services are critical in order to reduce recidivism and help incarcerated people quickly integrate back into society.”⁴⁵ While assistance may be needed in the short term, the ex-offender must take responsibility and become a giver rather than a taker from society. An honest and hard-working man who cares for his needs through licit work will enjoy the fruit and reward for his labor.

What Do Inmates Need?

Inmates face the unique challenges of recidivism, addiction, abandonment, and employment. These four areas are real challenges for inmates and must not be taken lightly. To address these challenges, two questions must be answered: What do inmates need? What are the most crucial needs for inmates to overcome the impact of relational brokenness? In this section, the focus will turn to the inmate’s need for repentance, reconciliation with God and others, renewal, and reintegration. These four needs are met foundationally through God’s work in the gospel.

Repentance

The first challenge this chapter addressed was recidivism, which measured the likelihood of an inmate to reoffend within three years. Most research appears to state that six out of ten inmates released will reoffend within three years. When expanded to a ten-year period, almost 80 percent of inmates will find themselves incarcerated again. The criminal justice system uses recidivism rates to measure success; however, recidivism measures are typically based on priorities other than biblical standards. Recidivism remedies primarily address behavioral modification and measure only the inmate’s ability to stay out of prison for over three, five, or ten years and thus break the cycle of incarceration. When addressing addiction, the primary concerns often become sobriety and the person’s ability to remain free from drugs, alcohol, or other substance abuse.

⁴⁵ Couloute and Kopf, “Out of Prison & Out of Work,” 4.

Abandonment may be measured by considering whether a parent pays child support or shows up on occasion, while neglecting to consider the heart of the relationship.

Regarding post-release employment, a man may be faithful to show up to a job, but what it is the quality of his work and concern for the relationships around him? Many of these measurements are based on observable or quantifiable behaviors, however they fail to address deeper issues beyond behavioral modification.

Many inmates recidivate, remain addicted, fail to seek reconciliation in relationships, and return to working for dishonest gain because there is a lack of repentance. In the world's system of measurement, God's righteousness is dismissed. As a result, the goals for inmates are distorted. Everyone desires that the ex-offender stay out of prison, leave drugs alone, be present for their family, and maintain employment, but these goals are not the ultimate goal. God's desire for man is much deeper. He desires repentance in the depths of a man's heart and trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Rather than being motivated by self, God desires a man to be motivated to live for His pleasure.

Repentance is a disappearing doctrine in the church and foreign to the world.

J. I. Packer defines repentance:

The New Testament word for repentance means changing one's mind so that one's views, values, goals, and ways are changed and one's whole life is lived differently. The change is radical, both inwardly and outwardly; mind and judgment, will and affections, behavior and life-style, motives and purposes, are all involved. Repenting means starting to live a new life.⁴⁶

Repentance requires a reorientation of one's entire life toward God, which leads, by faith, to a whole new life before God and man. Wayne Grudem describes repentance as "a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and

⁴⁶ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 162.

walk in obedience to Christ.”⁴⁷ Repentance toward God has been the primary message of the prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles, yet today, the doctrine appears unpopular, unprofessional, and uncommon in addressing the greatest needs of the souls of man (Ezek 14:6; Joel 2:13; Matt 3:2; 4:17; Acts 2:38).

Unless an inmate takes ownership of his actions before God, he will likely continue in his same patterns before God and need to be restrained from his family and society. He may be tempted to take deadly risks with drugs, cause others to suffer, and contribute to the economic value of the black market. Jeremy Pierre explains the darkness of man’s heart: “Scripture shows that sin contaminates every aspect of human experience—the deep functions of the heart as well as their expression. The entire trajectory of function is polluted—not just beliefs, but also understandings; not just desires, but also feelings; not just commitments, but also choices.”⁴⁸ Once again, behavioral modification is insufficient. A fundamental change wrought by God must occur in the heart of an inmate. Timothy Keller contributes, “We must be inwardly grieved and appalled enough by a sin—even as we frame the whole process with the knowledge of our acceptance in Christ—that it loses its hold over us.”⁴⁹ Inmates must learn to hate sin—any rebellion toward the Holy God—and turn to Christ as the only hope of deliverance. A work of God in the heart of man by the Holy Spirit allows a man to know forgiveness and live for the pleasure of God.

As an inmate repents toward God and has faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the fruit or behavior of repentance will be displayed in a changed life. An inmate may need to make radical changes concerning his present associations and make wise plans post-

⁴⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 1522.

⁴⁸ Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 62.

⁴⁹ Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (London: Penguin, 2016), 212.

release. Packer asserts, “Repenting of any vice means going in the opposite direction, to practice the virtues most directly opposed to it.”⁵⁰ Some solutions might include changing friends inside the prison, attending Christian chapel services, and becoming involved in discipleship groups. An inmate needs to plan for righteous living on the first day he is released from prison. Instead of moving in with a woman with whom he has been romantically involved, he needs to choose to find housing through a reentry program or family member, so temptations can be limited. He may need to throw away his old phone and purchase a new one. He will need to persevere in finding and maintaining employment. A multitude of practical applications can flow from a heart rightly related to God.

Finally, repentance toward God and walking as a disciple of Christ Jesus becomes a higher motivation than seeking to please a family member, the mother of one’s children, or another significant person. Welch reasons, “If you are trying to change because of pressure from family or friends, that isn’t all bad, but it won’t last. If you simply fear being caught, that certainly won’t last. The only reason that can take us through the tough times is God.”⁵¹ When adverse situations arise in these relationships, the ex-offender can become tempted to escape to drugs, which opens a door to the criminal lifestyle. Ultimately, lesser motivations and unmet expectations can disappoint an ex-offender, yet a man who repents toward God and seeks to please him will never be disappointed (Rom 10:11).

Reconciliation

An inmate who becomes a new creation in Christ Jesus through repentance and faith in Christ’s finished work needs to understand the nature of reconciliation between

⁵⁰ Packer, *Concise Theology*, 163.

⁵¹ Edward T. Welch, *Just One More: When Desires Don’t Take No for an Answer* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2002), 7.

God and man (2 Cor 5:17). The primary need for an inmate is to know God. An inmate is a sinner and sufferer. He has been sinned against and has sinned against others.

Relationships have been broken, but an inmate needs to be set free from guilt, shame, and slavish fear. Likewise, he needs to be free of bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice (Eph 4:31). Jesus Christ, the mediator between God and man, died on the cross to provide spiritual freedom and reconciliation with God. Welch states, “Our liberation comes through a person, not a system of ideas and principles.”⁵² The world’s system fails to understand the gospel, and, despite its good intent, misdirects inmates to a multitude of solutions that fail to provide the power to live a transformed life (Rom 1:16). A personal relationship with God, through the mediating work of Christ, applied by the Holy Spirit to the heart of man, is an inmate’s greatest need. Jesus secured reconciliation to God through the blood of his cross (Col 1:20).

Men who have been in and out of prison, addicted, abandoned, and engaged in worthless pursuits can come home to the heavenly Father (Luke 15:18). Packer says, “Reconciliation of the warring parties is needed, but this can occur only if God’s wrath is somehow absorbed and quenched and man’s anti-God heart, which motivates his anti-God life, is somehow changed. In mercy, God the angry Judge sent his Son into the world to bring about the needed reconciliation.”⁵³ Jesus performed this work on the cross, and the resurrection proved God’s satisfaction with his Son’s work of reconciliation. Fred Sanders asserts, “When we become sons of God, we are joined to the sonship of the incarnate Son, which is in turn the human enactment of the eternal sonship of the second person of the Trinity.”⁵⁴ An inmate can become a believer. As a result, he becomes a son of God in union with Jesus Christ and in fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

⁵² Welch, *Addictions*, 10.

⁵³ Packer, *Concise Theology*, 131–32.

⁵⁴ Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 163.

The motherless and fatherless can be taken in by the Lord (Ps 27:10). Michael Reeves describes the community within the Trinity: “The Father, Son, and Spirit have always been in delicious harmony, and thus they create a world where harmonies—distinct being, persons, or notes working together in unity—are good, mirroring the very being of the triune God.”⁵⁵ An inmate is no longer identified as a mere number given by the State. He no longer has to see himself as a product of the past or present. He does not have to be identified by his earthly family, neighborhood, or criminal record. Through Christ, he has been brought into a loving relationship with God. Keller aptly comments,

Perhaps, you protest, your own father or mother did you wrong. That must not be a barrier to prayer, for only in Christ will you get the love that you need to make up for your unhappy family history. It does no good to say, “Why weren’t they the parents they should have been?” There are no parents who are what they should be. Psalm 27:10 says: “Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will bear me up.” This new relationship with God is what you need if you feel like a failure, if you feel lonely, or if you are sinking further into despair. Because of the infinite price paid by your brother, Jesus, God your father will hold you up.⁵⁶

Knowing God brings satisfaction to the inmate’s soul. His never-ending desire to satisfy his appetites is quenched (John 6:35). Gregory Cochran declares, “Now that the Spirit has helped us, we can cry out, ‘Abba, Father,’ to the only perfect father knowable on the earth. We call the living God our Father.”⁵⁷ Knowing God, then, sustains the believing inmate and encourages him to face the challenges of life. Because he is now a son of God, he desires to please his heavenly Father, who finds pleasure in his love for Christ and life of obedience.

With a firm foundation and growing intimacy with the Father, an inmate has the resources of the Word and Spirit to help him navigate his existing relationships and

⁵⁵ Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 59.

⁵⁶ Keller, *Prayer*, 80.

⁵⁷ Gregory C. Cochran, “Remembering the Father in Fatherhood: Biblical Foundations and Practical Implications of the Doctrine of the Fatherhood of God,” *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 1, no. 2 (2011): 12.

rebuild those which are in ruins. Of first importance, an inmate needs to consider his closest neighbors. He can practice Christian living with his cellmate or in the unit in which he lives. David Powlison posits, “One step behind the supreme pleasure of loving God is the pleasure of true friendship—loving others. We sometimes get confused about the fact that there are people we deeply enjoy.”⁵⁸ An inmate needs to be selective in developing close relationships within the prison, but he can find a man or group of men who are pursuing Christ. Writing about the blessing of friendship, Sam Allberry adds, “By its very nature friendship is a wonderful form of intimacy. The friend is the person who knows you at your sparkling best and shameful worst and yet still loves you. To be so deeply known and so deeply loved is precious.”⁵⁹ An inmate who delights in God and enjoys Christian fellowship prepares himself for reentry and success.

In addition, an inmate who knows God and learns to build godly friendships inside the prison is equipped to continue the process beyond the prison walls. He may be able to begin the reconciliation process with family members. Because he has been forgiven by God, he has a desire to seek the forgiveness of others (Eph 4:32). He will desire to join an evangelical local church where he can continue his spiritual progress, develop a godly support system, and patiently pursue relationship with his natural family. He must be prepared to suffer well in the will of God. He must realize that some people will not be ready to trust him. An inmate may become aware of the pain of rejection, but his acceptance before God, the love of his spiritual family, and his close friends in Christ can provide the support he needs to patiently endure the suffering while he waits on God to restore his relationships. If family members are unbelievers, his life can be a witness to the saving grace of God and their great need for reconciliation.

⁵⁸ Powlison, *Breaking the Addictive Cycle*, 28.

⁵⁹ Sam Allberry, *Seven Myths about Singleness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 60.

Renewal: Viewing Problems through a Biblical Lens

The aim of Christianity is continuous conformity into the image of Christ. An inmate who has recently repented and been reconciled to God stands in need of growth in grace. Timothy Lane and Paul David Tripp explain, “Godliness is a God-honoring life from the time I come to Christ until the time I go home to be with him.”⁶⁰ A believing inmate has so much to look forward to in the future. However, he will require a renewed mind in order to overcome the past and live in the present. He will need to develop a biblical perspective of his new identity, solving problems, suffering as a Christian, and living in Christian community.

An inmate has acquired many labels due to his criminal activity. Inmates often carry a metaphorical badge and are identified by their crime. For example, some are known as drug dealers, thieves, murderers, sexually immoral, or frauds. These identities are based on their ungodly behaviors. In 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, the apostle Paul described such a list of sinners; however, he stated the church members who used to be on that list now had been cleansed by Christ’s sacrifice and identified as His. Almost everywhere an inmate goes within the prison, he must use an identification number given to him by the State. Like a Social Security number, an inmate carries his number for life. Often, an inmate will have tattoos on his body to symbolize his affiliation with a certain gang or group of people. Some inmates are identified by their home city or neighborhood. They are identified as criminals by society. These identities are true and can explain the inmate’s past, but Lane and Tripp note that “in our blindness, we take on our problems as identities. While divorce, depression, and single parenthood are significant human experiences, they are not our identities.”⁶¹ An inmate who has repented and been reconciled to God has a new identity.

⁶⁰ Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *How People Change* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2008), 5.

⁶¹ Lane and Tripp, *How People Change*, 5.

An inmate who has been saved by grace must know who he is in Christ. Tripp comments, “New life in Christ creates a new identity: being part of His glorious plan; being His inheritor; being empowered by Him; reigning with Him; being full and growing full by Him as we live in Him.”⁶² When the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, he began his letter by informing the new believers in that city of their new identity. In Christ, a new believer is blessed, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, enlightened, an heir of God, and sealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:3–14). A believer’s new standing in Christ is the result of faith in Christ’s finished work for the purpose of glorying in the grace of God (Eph 1:6, 12, 14). Further, Cochran adds, “Identity, in the sense in which we are speaking about fatherhood, requires an intentional name bearing which requires the offspring to display the character of the father.”⁶³ A believing inmate’s new identity in Christ becomes the source of new behaviors because the desires of a Christian are to please his heavenly Father. While the criminal justice system may never clear an inmate’s record, a believing inmate’s record is cleared in heaven. Family, friends, and the community may continue to look at the ex-offender through the lens of their past, but the believing inmate who knows his new identity can face his problems with confidence in the help of God.

An inmate will face many problems within the prison and when he is released. For some, the problems of his past were paused during his incarceration, but with Christ, he can develop a clear picture of what he must do to be responsible before God and man. Jay Adams adds, “In all of this, it’s essential to remember that God promises you the help you will need. He doesn’t leave you to your own ingenuity or your own efforts to solve your problems.”⁶⁴ Having God’s help does not mean the journey will be easy. An inmate

⁶² Paul David Tripp, “The Present Glories of Redemption,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17, no. 2 (1999): 36.

⁶³ Cochran, “Remembering the Father in Fatherhood,” 12.

⁶⁴ Jay E. Adams, *Problems: Solving Them God’s Way* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2009), 20.

has been accustomed to trying to solve his problems on his own or in ungodly ways. Heather Rice paints a beautiful picture of turning to God for help, writing, “Turning from self and choosing the way of faith in any given moment is a whole lot less scary when you realize that what you find at the end is nothing short of the Father’s warm embrace.”⁶⁵ The heavenly Father desires to help his children work through problems in righteous ways. He rejoices when his children ask for help and provides wisdom to navigate life’s difficulties (Jas 1:3–5).

Once again, inmates have many problems to navigate. An inmate may have social problems due to past relationships. He may have financial problems due to fees, fines, or child support. He may have difficulty finding a job. He may be filled with grief over friends who remain in the lifestyle he has escaped. Problems may at times seem insurmountable. However, he must learn to suffer well in the will of God. Howard Dial provides two essential qualities when considering suffering: “At least two qualities were a part of Christ’s attitude toward suffering— acceptance (Matt. 26:39) and endurance (Heb. 12:2). His endurance exemplified itself in His forgiving spirit, concern for those suffering around Him, and a clear sense of purpose.”⁶⁶ An inmate who comes to Christ must understand that all of his problems will not be erased. His heart has changed. His perspective has changed. He has a new life, but he must take ownership of his problems and work through them in the will of God. He must remember his joy is rooted in his new position in Christ, not in the absence of problems. John Piper posits, “But happiness in suffering signals the value of God. Suffering and hardship joyfully accepted in the path of obedience to Christ show the supremacy of Christ more than all our faithfulness in fair

⁶⁵ Heather L. Rice, “What Does Godly Change Look Like?” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 24, no. 1 (2006): 64.

⁶⁶ Howard E. Dial, “‘Sufferology’: Counseling Toward Adjustment in Suffering,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 3, no. 2 (1979): 22.

days.”⁶⁷ A believing inmate who joyfully accepts his responsibilities and endures will be a bright witness in the world.

Finally, an inmate must understand the importance of living in Christian community. He cannot live an isolated life (Prov 18:1). Within the prison system, inmates are allowed to gather in chapel for various religious services. A believing inmate needs to begin to develop Christian relationships inside the prison so he will be better prepared once he is released. Often, prisons like TTCC allow volunteers to come in to conduct services. An inmate needs to be surrounded by the Christian community inside the prison and make plans to be a faithful member of a local Bible-believing church. He needs to hear the preached Word and be surrounded by a loving congregation that desires to walk in the truth. John Bettler shares the importance of applying truth to all of life: “Bring your suffering to Jesus, and truth it. Bring your pain to Jesus, and truth it. Bring your disappointments to Jesus, and truth them. What does it mean to truth them? It means to order your life by what Jesus says about pain, disappointments, and suffering.”⁶⁸ The local Bible-believing church bears the responsibility of upholding truth and living it out to the glory of God (1 Tim 3:15). An ex-offender who is serious about following Christ will find himself committed to the Christian community beyond the walls of prison.

Reintegration

An inmate who finishes his sentence will be released back into society. From July 2020 through June 2021, the TDOC released 11,875 inmates back into the free world.⁶⁹ Those released back into the free world may have completed his sentence or

⁶⁷ John Piper, “Counseling with Suffering People,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 21, no. 2 (2003): 23.

⁶⁸ John Bettler, “Far as the Curse Is Found: Human Suffering and the Hope of the Gospel,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 22, no. 4 (2004): 19.

⁶⁹ TDOC Decision Support: Research and Planning, *Tennessee Felon Population Update, December 2021* (Nashville: State of Tennessee, 2021), 11, <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/correction/documents/FelonDecember2021.pdf>.

been released to probation or community corrections. TDOC actively oversees 64,751 ex-offenders through probation offices or community corrections.⁷⁰ Some men will continue to have some restrictions within his county. Instead of becoming angry at certain restrictions and monthly drug tests, he needs to see these as opportunities to maintain accountability until his probation or community corrections sentence has expired.

Once an inmate reenters society, he must meet some basic needs. Experts on mass incarceration in America “define the first steps to social integration as the development of family relationships, finding a place to stay, and obtaining a means of subsistence.”⁷¹ Basically, the inmate needs a support system, a place to stay, and a means to provide for himself. Regardless of family relationships, an ex-offender must have a support system. Many men fail to make wise plans for release and end up among the same crowd of people from which they came prior to arrest and incarceration. TTCC’s reentry services and the Board of Probation and Parole work diligently to help men plan for success. If family relationships are strained, some of the best options are to enroll in aftercare programs such as Men of Valor.

Men of Valor prison ministry and similar ministries in Tennessee understand the unique challenges faced by the incarcerated and know the solutions to a man’s problems. Western, Braga, Davis, and Sirois explain:

The stress of transition describes the anxiety of adjusting to social interaction in free society under conditions of severe material deprivation. At the individual level, the stress of transition may impair mental health, trigger relapse, and more generally slow the process of social integration. At a community level, the stress of transition broadly burdens social relationships in localities with high incarceration rates.⁷²

Transitioning from life inside prison to the free world can be stressful. For example, an inmate accustomed to ordering goods from a limited commissary list can

⁷⁰ TDOC Decision Support: Research and Planning, *Tennessee Felon Population Update, December 2021*, 13.

⁷¹ Western et al., “Stress and Hardship after Prison,” 1515.

⁷² Western et al., “Stress and Hardship after Prison,” 1514.

become overwhelmed when faced with a multitude of options at a grocery store. Change and adaption to a new environment can be hard, and the ex-offender will need help through the process of reentering the free world.

It must be noted that some men do not desire to change. Every man needs help, but some have not become aware of their greatest need: salvation by grace through faith (Eph 2:8–9). Jesus offered forgiveness to both criminals on the cross. One criminal’s heart was convicted by the holiness of Christ, and he understood Christ to be the King of the Jews and all nations (Luke 23:42). The other criminal witnessed the atonement but remained unchanged in the face of death. Faith-based programs and social services must be aware of the reality of helping individuals with a reckless past and no desire to change. Nevertheless, an inmate released from prison has many choices to make and work to be done.

Along with a support system, the ex-offender needs to have a good place to stay. A man needs to think about where he will live and what temptations he will face in his new environment. MOV opened a new campus in Antioch, Tennessee with a bed capacity for ninety-three men. The facility is new and reminds men of the dignity they possess before God. Some programs have not maintained their properties, and it can reflect a lack of care and compassion toward the men they serve.

Finally, reentry programs like MOV have developed job partners. Each man released from prison is picked up at the gate and provided his first post-release meal. He is given a hygiene bag, provided clothes, and assigned a room with another man. Tony Parker adds, “TDOC collaborated with the Department of Human Services (DHS) to provide a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) application process that is specific to incarcerated individuals 30 days prior to their release. As a result, 1,208 inmates completed SNAP applications in FY21.”⁷³ Most men receive SNAP benefits to

⁷³ TDOC, *Annual Report, Fiscal Year 2021*, 14.

be able to purchase food before the benefits phase out after a man has been employed for a few months. After thirty days post-release, each man is guaranteed a job. He begins work and develops a work history, which will help him possess more marketable skills.

The journey from prison to a contributor in the free world requires faith, diligence, and the desire to take responsibility. Temptations abound and many lusts can drive a man back into a life of crime. However, love is patient (1 Cor 13:4). A man who has been restored to God can be restored to family, church, and to society. Chapter 2 considered Jeremiah walking among the ruins of Jerusalem. The work seemed impossible. Jeremiah knew God's mercies were new every morning; he knew God was faithful (Lam 3:23). Although Jeremiah did not live to see the city of Jerusalem rebuilt, future generations witnessed the glory of God walking in its midst. The greatest glory happened outside the city gates, where the Lord of glory was crucified to identify with the sinner's plight (Heb 13:12–13). Through suffering the consequence of death, Jesus Christ provided life and love to help all who believe overcome the consequence of sin (Rom 8:37).

Conclusion

This chapter has described practical issues faced by inmates who are overcoming the impact of abandonment. This chapter has addressed two basic questions: what unique challenges do inmates face, and what do inmates need? Inmates face challenges of recidivism, addiction, abandonment, and employment. Inmates need repentance, reconciliation, renewal, and reintegration. Every current inmate at TTCC must seriously consider these questions and determine who he will serve and what he will believe about life. If an inmate answers these questions correctly, he will have a great opportunity to overcome the impact of abandonment and be a witness to the resurrection power of God to transform a life and make the world a better place.

CHAPTER 4

DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of this ministry research project was to address the impact of abandonment on inmates at TTCC by developing an intensive discipleship curriculum in an effort to break the cycle of broken relationships, build healthy God-honoring relationships inside the prison, and prepare men to reenter society as men of valor. For the past five years, I have been ministering weekly at TTCC except during facility lockdowns. As a minister to men inside the prison and outside the prison at MOV's Valor Ridge campus, I have observed the impact of abandonment on men's lives as they have discussed feelings of desertion, the pursuit of acceptance and belonging, and the desire to be known. Men have made harmful choices that led them into prison, and if left unaddressed, a man reentering society will continue in foolish behaviors if he does not seek fundamental heart change. Therefore, I developed this ministry research project to increase the knowledge of inmates concerning the impact of abandonment. This chapter addresses the steps taken to implement the project, including survey development, lesson preparation, curriculum review, obtaining approval from the proper authorities, and implementation.

Survey Development, Lesson Preparation, and Curriculum Review

As a student enrolled in the SBTS doctoral program, I was challenged during the first semester to develop an idea for a ministry research project. I serve as a bi-vocational pastor, so I had the option of creating a project for the church or inside the prison. I searched the ProQuest database for ministry research projects conducted inside prison, but results from similar projects were scarce. With this knowledge, my faculty

supervisor and I discussed options and concluded that implementing a project on the mission field of a prison would be unique and beneficial.

The Project Methodology class challenged me to formulate a rough outline of chapters 2 and 3 and create relevant research instruments. Creating an outline during my time on campus was mentally challenging; however, the professor encouraged the students to trust the process. Though we did not have full knowledge of how the project would develop, each student was challenged to think ahead about the project. I am grateful for the guidance of my faculty supervisor and the professor, who told the students that we would gain more understanding of the process as we progressed.

Survey Preparation

The work done in Project Methodology laid the foundation for chapters 2 and 3 of the project. I refined both chapter outlines through discussions with my faculty supervisor. The outlines for chapters 2 and 3 became the basis for an eight-lesson curriculum.

Before writing the lessons, I knew I needed to have my research instruments developed to present to CoreCivic's research department. Approval from the Facility Support Center (FSC) had to be obtained before project implementation. In the fall of 2021, I enrolled in the online Applied Empirical Research class. At that time, I had a raw version of my pre- and post- survey, which had been developed during Project Methodology II. This class helped shape the survey through peer review and feedback. The feedback pertained to the organization of the survey, word choices, and ease of use. In addition, the advanced research assignment enabled students to work on the survey throughout the semester to further refine and prepare for the professor's final analysis before implementation.

The pre-survey was designed to gather quantitative data in three different categories. First, the family dynamic assessment would provide insight into the marital

status of the inmate's parents, his relationship with father and mother, living arrangements, current relational status (i.e., single, married, divorced), and the number of biological children. Second, the grief assessment included ten true/false questions measuring the level of stress and grief one has experienced in life. Third, the belief assessment included sixteen questions with answers measured on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The belief assessment section was administered in the pre- and post-survey to see if the inmate's belief assessment would reflect a movement toward "strongly agree." Each question was designed to have a positive response on the six-point Likert scale.

During the Applied Empirical Research class, I realized that I needed to gather qualitative data to enhance the research results. Many men who are enrolled in MOV's discipleship groups have a general knowledge of the Bible. Each week, men are engaged in Bible reading and journaling and meet with volunteer leaders to discuss the Scriptures and life. I was concerned the quantitative data would not provide an accurate depiction of the impact of the curriculum. Therefore, I chose a mixed methods approach and added a four-question Abandonment Impact Interview,¹ enabling participants to have a voice in data collection. My professor agreed, yet cautioned, "My only concern is probably outside of your control: getting the same group of participants before and after."² I had the same concern, and participant retention influenced the project timing and duration. On January 12, 2022, I received feedback from the professor, made necessary changes, and was prepared to present a proposal to CoreCivic.

Lesson Preparation

The lesson outlines were derived from chapters 2 and 3 of the ministry

¹ See appendix 2.

² Joseph C. Harrod, unpublished class notes on final analysis for 80950 (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fall Semester, 2021).

research project. After completing Applied Empirical Research in the fall of 2021, I enrolled in the Foundations of Teaching course in the spring of 2022. I mention these classes because I believe taking these classes earlier aided in the completion of the project. Both classes helped synchronize the preparation necessary for the development of the survey and curriculum.

The curriculum sought to introduce men to God's pattern for relationships in the home and the pain associated with rebellion against God's plans. This course focused on God's plans for relationships, understanding the experience of suffering, finding hope in God and the finished work of Christ, and overcoming the impact of abandonment by following Jesus Christ through repentance, reconciliation with God, renewal, and reentering society as a new man. The course content outline was developed and submitted on March 17, 2022, and the course learning outcomes were completed on March 28, 2022. The lessons were written in the month of April and the first week of May 2022.

Lesson 1 was derived from Proverbs 1:7–19 and titled “The Patterned Life of a Wise Son.” This lesson introduced God's pattern for relationships, which includes a wise son who fears the Lord, listens to God-ordained authority, rejects the solicitation of gangs, and avoids an untimely death due to reckless living.

Lesson 2 was developed from Lamentations 3:1–21 and titled “Experiencing Brokenness.” This lesson considered the sinful consequences of rebelling against God and the suffering associated with living in a broken world. The experience of suffering was described as a living death, an inescapable situation full of trauma and bitterness, and so painful that the suffering is difficult to describe. The Bible provides language to help the sinner and sufferer to lament.

Lesson 3 was drawn from Lamentations 3:1–22 and titled “Hope in the Darkness: Seeing the Character of God.” This lesson focused on the character of God and the hope he provides in the darkest situations. With the Lord's daily help, people, cities, and nations can rebuild and look forward to the future despite current circumstances. The

goal of this lesson was to increase an inmate's hope in the character of God. God alone is the Rock upon which a person can build his life (Deut 32:4).

Lesson 4 was taken from Matthew 27:46 and based on the fourth cry of Jesus on the cross. The lesson was titled "The Wise Son Who Leads the Way to Glory." This lesson considered the gospel of Jesus Christ, the wise Son, who walked through the folly of this world, experienced abandonment from God and man at the cross, overcame the impact of abandonment, and promised to be with his people forever.

Lesson 5 was titled "Reducing Recidivism through Repentance." This lesson examined the doctrine of repentance. The criminal justice system measures success by considering recidivism rates, which are primarily based on behavioral modification. The Bible has a better solution—repentance—a total reorientation of one's life towards God's desires, thoughts, affections, and commitments.

Lesson 6 was titled "Reconciliation: A New Standing with God." This lesson concentrated on the joy derived in being reconciled to the Father by the work of the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit. When an inmate is reconciled to God, he has a relationship with the heavenly Father, is in union with Jesus Christ, and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. With a new standing, an inmate is empowered to seek and grant forgiveness, make restitution, and learn to be faithful in his relational roles. The goal of this class was to give participants an understanding that reconciliation with God is foundational to overcoming abandonment, walking in spiritual freedom, and rebuilding relationships.

Lesson 7 was titled "Renewal: Viewing Problems through a Biblical Lens." This lesson walked through three common problems that challenge inmates both inside the prison and once released. The problems included understanding one's identity, overcoming addiction, and righteous suffering. The goal was to help participants have a biblical worldview concerning common problems inmates and ex-offenders encounter.

Lesson 8 was titled "Reentering Society and Overcoming the Impact of Abandonment." This lesson focused on preparing inmates to reenter society and break the

cycle of broken relationships. Instead of taking from society, an inmate would be reminded of the importance of fulfilling his God-ordained roles and positively impacting society. An inmate would be reminded of the hope available in Christ and the suffering he will need to endure in his new walk of faith. The goal of this class was to help a man reenter society as a new man who overcomes the impact of relational brokenness in his life. Following this lesson's completion on May 3, 2022, all eight lessons were submitted for review to the Foundation of Teaching class instructor.

Curriculum Evaluation

On May 9–10, 2022, I asked individuals to volunteer for an expert panel to evaluate the curriculum. The expert panel would utilize a rubric to evaluate the curriculum's biblical soundness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability. My project goal was to meet or exceed 90 percent of the evaluation criterion. Four well-qualified individuals agreed to serve on the expert panel.

The first panelist was an associate professor in the College of Education at Middle Tennessee State University. She noted, "Each of the eight lessons had a clear plan with a learning outcome for each participant to personalize the learning. Further, the overall unit has a clear backwards design that leads participants through a series of learnings towards the end goal."³ The second panelist was a fellow prison minister serving as an adjunct professor at Grand Canyon University. Concerning the curriculum, he commented, "Its application will be extremely profitable for men in prison and recovery." The third panelist was a MOV counselor who received a Doctor of Ministry in biblical counseling at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He counsels at Valor Ridge with ex-offenders during their first thirty days post-release. He said, "The content didn't stop at content but implored action by the participant." The fourth panelist was my

³ See appendix 4 for panelist information.

faculty supervisor, who concluded, “Introduces the idea: not sure if it is enough to overcome a lifetime of abandonment issues.” I agreed with his honest assessment. Inmates—or anyone—with relational issues need more than a class to help overcome the impact of abandonment. There is a need for consistent and intensive discipleship and biblical counseling to help one overcome his past, live in the present, and look forward to the future. By May 25, 2022, the curriculum evaluation tools were received from the panelists and each criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level.

Obtaining Approval from the Proper Authorities

When I began this project, I did not realize the steps necessary to obtain approval to implement the project inside TTCC. After deciding on my topic, I talked with the chaplain at TTCC in the fall of 2020. At that time, I had been teaching classes weekly at TTCC for over two and a half years. In my mind, the only thing different between conducting the ministry research project and my normal activities was administering a pre- and post-survey. The chaplain immediately informed me of the need to gain approval from the Facility Support Center (FSC).

On September 21, 2020, I emailed the senior director of reentry services (SDRS). He followed up with a phone call to the director of chaplaincy and volunteer services and me. Men of Valor has maintained a relationship with CoreCivic headquarters and FSC since 2005, when Men of Valor implemented a program inside the Metro-Davidson County Detention Facility in Nashville, Tennessee. Both men were professional and encouraging and provided me with the next steps necessary for approval.

On December 3, 2020, I submitted a research proposal to the SDRS. He had explained the need to conduct the research on human instruments with an approach that protected their anonymity. Therefore, I developed an identifier code that each inmate would use on the pre- and post-surveys. At this point, I had not yet developed or refined my research instrument, so the proposal was incomplete and lay dormant. On August 20,

2021, I emailed the SDRS to inform him of my progress in the program. Pursuing a ministry research project without approval was a risk I was willing to take. I realized that if I failed to gain approval, I could conduct a project with ex-offenders at MOV's Valor Ridge. However, a new ministry context would cause me to have to rework my research instrument and rewrite portions of chapters 1, 2, and 3.

During Applied Empirical Research, I developed research instruments to send to CoreCivic's research department. I also hired an editor who helped to make the survey more presentable and easier to read. On January 18, 2022, I emailed the SDRS. He informed me that the FSC had hired a new research analyst who would be my contact moving forward. On April 11, 2022, I emailed the research analyst to check the status of the project proposal. She requested I submit a few more required documents before sending the information to the FSC Research Committee chair for review.

On May 9, 2022, I spoke with the FSC Research Committee chair and shared the heart of the ministry research project. He said he would approve the project and move it forward to the FSC Research Committee, which is comprised of the director of chaplaincy and volunteer services, the senior director of ethics and compliance, the manager of tactical and emergency training, the associate of general counsel, and the director of public affairs. On May 25, 2022, I contacted the warden at TTCC and informed him of my proposal to the FSC. He told me he thought it would be a great program, and he supported the project.

On May 27, 2022, the FSC Research Committee approved the project and advanced the approval process to FSC Facility Operations Review. On June 2, 2022, the committee chairman emailed the warden at TTCC and informed me that the vice president of facility operations and chief operating officer had approved the project on the contingency of receiving approval from TDOC.

The warden at TTCC said he would find out the next steps to implement the project based on TDOC guidelines. On June 8, 2022, he informed me that I had the

approval to administer the research instrument and begin the project. I told him that I would work with the chaplains to determine the best time and place inside the prison to start the work.

Implementation

The chaplain department at Trousdale was experiencing change during the time of my project implementation. On May 4, 2022, I was informed that the chaplain overseeing volunteers would no longer be at TTCC. The other chaplain on staff had taken on the new role of overseeing volunteers. A new interim chaplain had been hired to replace the outgoing chaplain and would work through July 11, 2022. I met him on Monday, June 6, 2022, for the first time. On Monday, June 13, 2022, I conducted the MOV's chapel service as normal, and then I met with the reentry case manager to discuss the use of his training room in W building. He told me he did not have any training on Monday or Tuesday of the following week. I knew he had applied for the new chaplain position and was waiting to see if he would get the position. On June 14, 2022, I was informed that the reentry case manager would be the new chaplain.

On June 15, 2022, I attended a resource fair at TTCC that was prepared for about three hundred inmates. During this time, I talked with the chaplains about conducting the project in W building on June 20–21, 2022. Those dates seemed to work since the reentry training room was available for those two days. Since the main chapel has religious programming each day of the week, conducting a project in that space would conflict with existing programming. By choosing to work with MOV men in W building, we could limit movement across the facility and not interfere with other programs.

On June 16, 2022, I sent an "Overcoming the Impact of Abandonment" flyer and schedule to the reentry case manager (the new chaplain), and he circulated the information in W building. I also printed the lesson handouts for the classes. On June 17,

2022, I spoke with the new chaplain and discussed project implementation and technological needs. I recalled Donald Roy's project, "Equipping Inmates at Columbia Correctional Institute to Counsel Biblically." Roy stated that one thing he would change would be access to PowerPoint or some type of visual aid.⁴ I therefore requested approval to bring in my laptop.

On June 16–17, 2022, I created the PowerPoint presentations with the content for lessons 1 through 8. On June 18–19, 2022, I added pictures and graphics to enhance the learning experience. I spent some time clicking through each presentation to review and edit my work.

On Monday, June 20, 2022, I arrived at TTCC at 7:30 a.m. and conducted MOV's chapel service until 9:00 a.m. Due to a discrepancy on the outcount form, the next class was canceled and the volunteer was sent home. He and I decided to grab a quick breakfast. Prison ministry can be hard. A prison's top priority is security, and sometimes this makes operating consistent programs difficult. At 10:15 a.m., I returned to TTCC and brought my materials through the checkpoint, including my laptop, handouts, books, clicker for presentations, and pens. I passed through two magnetized doors and seven gates controlled by central command. I arrived at the reentry training room by 10:45 a.m. and began preparing the classroom.

Thirty-nine men signed up to attend the two-day seminar, and twenty-two arrived at 11:00 a.m. Upon arrival, I was informed that the men would not have trays delivered for lunch and would have to leave to go to the cafeteria. Call-outs for lunch can come at different times each day, so I decided to proceed with passing out the pre-survey and explaining how to complete it. Approximately ten to fifteen minutes later, the men were called to lunch. Some of the men had completed the surveys while others completed

⁴ Donald L. Roy, "Equipping Inmates at Columbia Correctional Institution in Lake City, Florida to Counsel Biblically" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 91.

them after returning from lunch. In addition to lunch, I was informed that commissary items would be delivered to W building at some point. Men purchase food, hygiene, and other items from a pre-approved list, and when it arrives, the items are delivered to the men. Men are eager to secure their items and put them in safekeeping. There are four pods in W building, and each pod had a delivery at a different time. A couple of the men had to leave for a few minutes to get their commissary items and return to class.

When I received all the pre-surveys, I noticed many of the men had checked “strongly agree” on most of the answers. Initially, I was concerned about the results of the project. Upon further review, I realized one man did not come back from lunch. This decreased my numbers from twenty-two participants to twenty-one. I recognized many of the men and asked how many were enrolled in a MOV discipleship group (d-group). These groups meet on Wednesday nights in the main chapel. Most of our volunteers are from Long Hollow Baptist Church, so they follow Robby Gallaty’s F-260 Bible Reading Plan and complete a H.E.A.R. journal each day to discuss in the group.⁵ Seventeen of twenty-one, or 81 percent, of the men were enrolled and active in a d-group. Ten of the men said they had been in a d-group for over one year. Four men said they had been participating in d-groups for over three years. Therefore, this group was comprised of some of the most faithful men participating in Men of Valor ministries at TTCC. This group would have a greater awareness of biblical truth and may already strongly agree with Bible beliefs concerning the subject of abandonment. My hope was to at least solidify their faith in biblical truth.

On Monday, the goal was to complete the pre-survey and present the first five lessons between 11:00 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. Each lesson was designed to have approximately 45 to 50 minutes of instruction and 10 to 15 minutes for class discussion.

⁵ Robby Gallaty and Kandi Gallaty, *Foundations: A 260-Day Bible Reading Plan for Busy Believers* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2015).

During instruction, I allotted time to pause and reflect on the information presented. We began and ended the day with prayer, asking the Lord to open hearts to receive the truth presented.

Lesson 1 started at 12:15 p.m., later than anticipated. The participants were instructed on God's blueprints for relationships. I opened the class with biographical information about the MOV's founder Carl Carlson. He had been an orphan, but God transformed him into a man who built a godly family and a ministry to the incarcerated. We discussed God's design for the family, the breakdown of the family, and the enticement of gangs (Prov 1:7–19). During an interview with participant EL1922, he described why he joined a gang:

I didn't know my father at first. The dudes in my community were the men I looked up to. I looked up to the gang members. They were my big brothers when no one else was there to look after you. The gang was about love, life, and loyalty. Then, it began to change. Guns came in. Money corrupted the good. I began to see men I use to look up to do dope, and I began to resent them.⁶

The Word of God described the path he had taken. The participant explained, "I retired from the gang in 2019. I saw how the gang used to be and how it was. For me to really change my life, I knew I had to forsake my past." Today, he desires to fear the Lord and walk in his ways.

Lesson 2 started at 1:15 p.m. I introduced the men to the life of Jeremiah, defined lamentation, and discussed the experience of brokenness. In particular, the men identified with Jeremiah's description of being led into darkness rather than the light (Lam 3:2). The participants could relate to Jeremiah's lament, his feeling of being walled in, and trying to escape a maze (Lam 3:7–9). We discussed how sometimes it is difficult to put into words the pain and suffering we have experienced, yet God provides language inspired by the Holy Spirit to enable his people to lament. Although the Lord may feel a

⁶ This quote is from participant's response from Abandonment Impact Interview. All quotes throughout chapter 4 and 5 that are introduced with an identifier code have been taken from participant interviews after the curriculum implementation.

million miles away, we have the biblical language to express our hearts to him.

Lesson 3 started at 2:15 p.m. and reviewed the attributes of God displayed in Lamentation 3:22–39. God keeps his covenant, and his mercies provide opportunities for daily renewal and hope. Although the times in Jeremiah’s day were dark, God was working. The men took courage in knowing God was working in the dark times of their life. Everything in a man’s life may not change overnight, yet God’s faithfulness can provide the hope a man needs to rebuild from the ruins of his life.

Lesson 4 started at 3:10 p.m. One man told me he could sense the power of God as we discussed the Wise Son who leads the way to glory. Participant TH0747 expressed, “When I thought about the way Jesus felt on the cross, I realize how my son may feel. I had never thought about what Jesus went through before the Father. It hit me hard.” His heart was moved as we discussed how the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit devised and accomplished the plan of redemption. Participant EY0824 added, “One of the things that stood out to me the most was just how much the Father truly loves me and has a deep desire to fellowship with me.” The intricate details of the cross are hard to explain, but the power of God can be experienced. Participant NY1884 explained, “It has showed [*sic*] me no matter what we’re going through, God will never leave us nor forsake us.” His description was a summation of the purpose of this lesson.

Lesson 5 started at 4:15 p.m. After discussing the national and state recidivism rates, we discussed the need for repentance today. Any man waiting to change upon release is setting himself up for failure. However, a man who seeks God and desires to live a transformed life can experience God working in his life inside the prison. Participant IN1857 articulated, “Anybody can fall so deep into the depths of sin, but when you truly, from the heart, repent and start to live a life of service to the Lord, he can pull you out and use you for something good. I want a chance to show society that God can change people through redemption and forgiveness.” Godly sorrow that leads to repentance and faith will always produce a new life with new behaviors (2 Cor 7:10).

Men need change at the heart level in order to reduce recidivism rates and make a positive impact on the community. The last lesson concluded by 5:30 p.m. Once again, I passed through the two magnetized doors, seven gates, and checkpoint. I left the prison at 5:45 p.m.

On Tuesday morning, I arrived at TTCC at 7:30 a.m., and lesson 6 began at 8:00 a.m. Twenty-one men were waiting in the room upon my arrival. We opened the day in prayer and began our discussion on reconciliation. I shared the story of Carl's brother, Philip, who shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with Carl while he was in prison. The gospel impacted Carl, and he was born again in a prison cell. Eventually, Carl would have four sons. One of Carl's sons, also named Philip, ended up in jail. During the past year, Philip graduated from the prison ministry his father founded. The ministry of reconciliation has been a motto of Men of Valor. On MOV's official logo, it states, "Reconciling Men to God, their Families, and Society, A Ministry of Hope." Participant AN1350 explained the heart of this lesson, writing, "Even though I lost my most important bloodline, relational brokenness with my children and death of my grandmother, I have gained more by joining Christ's church." We were reminded that prodigals can return home and find hope in a Father who will run out to greet them.

After lesson 1, I attended the TTCC Community Resource Board meeting at Farmhouse Restaurant, where they introduced the new chaplain. Every quarter, the board meets to discuss ways to provide services and programs for inmates at TTCC. The warden and some of his staff came to encourage the volunteers. At 12:15 p.m., I returned to TTCC.

Lesson 7 began at 12:45 p.m. One man was not able to attend the final two lessons, so this decreased my participation from 21 to 20 men. The lesson topic was "Renewal: Viewing Problems through a Biblical Lens." The class introduced three common problems that inmates encounter. First, men need to understand how one's identity shapes one's behaviors. Second, we discussed the problem of addiction. On the

grief assessment, 15 of 18 participants, or 83 percent, admitted to using drugs or alcohol to escape the pain of broken relationships.⁷ Although drugs are illegal in society and contraband inside the prison, men describe the ease of access and temptation inmates face on a regular basis. Third, we discussed the ability to remain faithful even through suffering. Participant ES2153 wrote that “the world may have closed its doors on you, but God has the keys to all of them.” He rightfully emphasized that with God, all things are possible (Luke 18:27).

Lesson 8 began at 1:45 p.m. and emphasized the need to have a wise plan for transitioning back to society. Participant IN2760 communicated, “One of the biggest things that stood out to me was the planning [of] your release You got to have a plan, and a Godly one, not just anything that sounds good. You can’t just think everything will pick up and get going for you right then.” In addition, some men explained the struggles of being unable to have contact with their children for various reasons. I offered a practical idea: using a journal, write to their son or daughter each time they have a desire to share something. When the time comes and a man is reunited with his child, he could present the journal as an act of love to his child, to show how much he thought of his son or daughter while incarcerated or reentering society. Participant TH0747 said, “The journaling idea was awesome. I am going to do it.” I was blessed to be able to share these truths, provide hope, and offer practical help to these men who will one day reenter society.

The post-survey was administered at 3:00 p.m. The seminar concluded during an outcount, so the men could not return to their units until the count was cleared. This provided sufficient time to have all twenty participants provide quantitative data by completing the abandonment impact survey and provide qualitative data by answering the four questions on the abandonment impact interview. In addition, five men volunteered to

⁷ See appendix 5.

provide more in-depth information based on the abandonment impact interview. With post-surveys and interviews complete, I passed through the two magnetized doors, seven gates, and checkpoint and returned to the free world. I left TTCC at 5:15 p.m.

Conclusion

After conducting the seminar, I shared handouts for each session, gave away seven copies of *Beyond the Walls*, and provided Men of Valor pamphlets for those who desired to know more about MOV. One man asked about the status of his application since he is scheduled to be released in August 2022. I contacted MOV's admissions director to ask if the applicant had completed his paperwork and was approved to come to Valor Ridge. The admissions director mailed information to the applicant. I also prepared certificates of completion for the participants. On July 11, 2022, I returned to TTCC and followed up with the men to thank them for their participation and provide a certificate of completion. Most of the men will continue to participate in Monday morning chapel services, Monday Bible study, and Wednesday night discipleship groups. Currently, MOV's discipleship groups are full. We have over seventy men in attendance each week. I am in the process of recruiting new volunteers so MOV can expand these groups to reach more men. My hope is that every man at Trousdale who desires to be in a discipleship group would be able to attend, come to know Christ, learn about living in Christian community, and overcome the impact of abandonment. The concluding chapter provides an analysis of the goals and evaluates the success of the overall project.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

The writer of Hebrews explains the focus of the Christian's race, stating, "Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb 12:2). From the start to the finish of this project, the overarching theme of each lesson was to encourage men to look to Jesus. Every family has been impacted by sin in varying degrees. Every person has experienced the brokenness that sin and suffering create in one's life. Every person needs hope in the character of God. Every person needs to see Jesus hanging on the cross and exclaiming, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46). Every person needs to know there is a way out of a sinful lifestyle through repentance and faith. Every person needs to know he or she can run to the Heavenly Father's embrace because of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Every person needs to be renewed in the spirit of his or her mind (Eph 4:23). Every person needs to know that his or her life impacts society in a positive or negative way. As a result, this project was designed to help inmates look to Jesus and overcome the impact of abandonment, or relational brokenness, in his life. This chapter will objectively evaluate the project's purpose and goals, explain its strengths and weaknesses, describes changes I would make, and include theological and personal reflections gleaned from the completion of this project.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this ministry research project was to address the impact of abandonment on inmates at TTCC by developing an intensive discipleship curriculum in

an effort to break the cycle of broken relationships, build healthy, God-honoring relationships inside the prison, and prepare men to reenter society as men of valor. The “Overcoming the Impact of Abandonment” seminar was approved by CoreCivic and TDOC and was conducted on June 20–21, 2022, at TTCC with twenty-one inmates in attendance.

Two limitations applied to the project. First, inmates can be skeptical of sharing personal information on surveys. To mitigate this problem, each participant created an identifier code made up of the last two letters of his first name, the numeric day of his birth (0–31), and the first two digits of his TOMIS number. The identifier code served to match the pre- and post-surveys, record attendance, and assure that all data remained anonymous. Second, an inmate cannot control lunch, medical, legal, or work call-outs. To mitigate this limitation, a participant was required to participate in 90 percent of the research project in order to be included in the statistical analysis. Due to this limitation, one participant was excluded from the final results because he completed six of eight sessions. This reduced the sample size to twenty participants.

In addition, two delimitations were utilized to accomplish the purpose of the project. First, an inmate needed to have at least two months remaining until his release date. The purpose of this delimitation was to ensure the participant’s ability to attend all sessions. This delimitation was met, as twenty men completed the seminar. A second delimitation required that inmates attended at least one service by the MOV ministry at TTCC prior to project implementation. Currently, MOV offers a Monday morning chapel service, Monday Bible study, and Wednesday night discipleship group. Based on attendance records, the Overcoming the Impact of Abandonment seminar was the first time two participants had attended a MOV service. While I was glad the two men completed the seminar, I was unable to use their data due to the delimitation. I hope these men will engage in other services now that they have been introduced to MOV. With limitations and delimitations in place, I was able to analyze the data for eighteen

participants. Overall, the purpose was fulfilled. The impact of abandonment was addressed, approval was granted to conduct the ministry research project inside TTCC, a curriculum was developed and taught, and men were better equipped to reenter society as men of valor. The next section will evaluate the project's goals and measure the project's success.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

The purpose of this project was considered successful with the achievement of three distinct goals. These goals served to help develop, implement, and measure the impact of the ministry research project. The first goal was to assess the current knowledge of the impact of abandonment among inmates at TTCC. The second goal was to develop an eight-session biblical curriculum that explained God's heart concerning the subject of abandonment and God's design for healthy relationships. The third goal was to increase the knowledge of abandonment by teaching a biblical curriculum inside the prison to at least twelve men.

First Goal

The first goal was designed to assess the current knowledge of the impact of relational brokenness experienced by the participants. The family dynamic assessment and grief assessment were used to gather data to evaluate the current knowledge of the impact of abandonment. The family dynamic assessment data revealed that almost 40 percent of participants experienced the divorce of their parents before age eighteen. Ten of the men (56 percent) described having a close relationship with their father. Participant IN1857 wrote, "My mom and dad divorced when I was 9. Dad died when I was 16. I had a good dad and saw him and talked to him regularly. I do think though that the divorce and death led me to seeking approval from others—a need for attention and acceptance. I had to learn to be a man on my own." God designed the father-child relationship to be one of relational intimacy founded upon love and truth. However, 44 percent of the men

described spending time occasionally with their dad or having a father who was not involved in his life.

The qualitative data sheds light on the importance of an engaged father in the home. Participant TH0747 posited, “He was standing there, but he was so far away from us.” His statement graphically describes how a father may be present in the life of his children but relationally disconnected. Participant EL1922 added, “He really didn’t start talking with me about what a father should teach until I got locked up. I just wanted a father-son conversation. It took me getting locked up to get one.” The same participant shared, “I called my dad one day and told him I loved him. The phone went silent. He asked me if I was ok. He said they never expressed love. It was foreign to him.” These participants described relational brokenness in personal and expressive ways. Participant EY0824 concluded, “I firmly believe had I had a father teaching me about God’s love I would have been a different person—much more successful.” This data was derived from interviews after the seminar and helped assess the impact of abandonment.

Over three-fourths of the participants described their relationship with their mother as close. There was only one participant who said his mother was not involved in his life. In addition, half of the participants described living with both parents during their childhood. Almost 40 percent of the participants grew up in a single-parent household. Two participants were raised by someone other than their parents. The impact of abandonment on the participants’ lives is evident based on the quantitative and qualitative data.

The grief assessment provided other data points to assess the pain that accompanies abandonment. Seventy-two percent of participants noted that their biological father was incarcerated during their childhood. Almost 40 percent of men had no contact with their children in the last thirty days. Forty-four percent noted they were raised in a home that struggled to have enough money for food, clothing, or shelter. The absence of a father and his loving concern caused many mothers in single-parent homes

to suffer.

Eighty-three percent of men admitted to using drugs or alcohol to escape the pain of broken relationships. Participant RD1862 revealed, “I found my dad when I was nineteen. I talked to him for a few months. He told me to worry about my own family. I didn’t see him again until his funeral. For the past fifteen years, I have been using drugs and alcohol.” Half of the participants have lost a friend to drug overdose, and almost 40 percent have lost a friend due to violence in the streets. Over 60 percent reported having a friend who is now incarcerated. The data reveals multiple levels of relational brokenness. As a result, 78 percent of participants understood the value of grieving the suffering they had experienced. Based on the quantitative and qualitative data, the first goal was successfully met.

Second Goal

The second goal was to develop an eight-session biblical curriculum explaining God’s heart concerning the subject of abandonment and God’s design for healthy relationships. I completed this goal during the 2022 spring semester’s Foundations of Teaching course.

The first four lessons were derived from chapter 2, concerning the biblical and theological basis of inmates overcoming the impact of abandonment. These lessons focused on three sets of Scripture: Proverbs 1:7–19, Lamentation 3:1–39, and Matthew 27:46. The last four sessions were generated from chapter 3, which addressed the question, “What do inmates need?” These lessons focused on repentance, reconciliation, renewal, and reintegration into society.

After completion of the curriculum, an expert panel consisting of four doctors in various fields reviewed the curriculum and deemed it to meet or exceed the sufficient level. Three of the four panelists are currently professors in a seminary or university. Two

of the panelists are working in prison ministry. With this review complete, the second goal was achieved.

Third Goal

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of abandonment by teaching a biblical curriculum inside the prison to at least twelve men. The measure for this goal included a post-training survey, and the goal was met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant difference between pre- and post-training survey scores: $t_{(17)} = 2.136, p = .0236$.

While analyzing the data, I noticed that question 17 appeared to be an outlier question. The statement read, "I believe I have suffered because of my parents' neglect of their responsibility to love me." This question was designed to demonstrate the antithesis of Proverbs 1:7–19: parents who fail to follow God's wisdom indeed bring suffering into homelife, which was originally designed for relational intimacy and character development.

All questions were written to have a positive answer. However, the mode score for question 17 on the pre- and post-survey equaled "1," whereas the mode for all other questions on the pre- and post-survey equaled "5" or "6." The average for question 17 was "2" in the pre-survey and "3" in the post-survey. Five participants marked "4" or above on the pre-survey. Six participants marked "4" or above on the post-survey. Based on my observation, the participants viewed their parents as loving, since most participants disagreed or strongly disagreed. At best, the question was confusing. If considered an outlier question and removed from statistical analysis, the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant difference between pre- and post-training survey scores: $t_{(17)} = 1.951, p = .0338$.

The quantitative data reveals that the goal was met, and likewise the qualitative data reveals an increase in knowledge. Participant RD1862 said, "I realize I have an

explanation for why I may have done things I have done, but it no longer has to be an excuse. I can see my life more clearly.” A man who can see his life more clearly has increased in knowledge. Participant TH0747 explained, “I didn’t realize it until now how much I tried to please people to fill a void only God can fill. I acted out to get attention, and it caused me to make choices that I made that led me to prison.” He made a great connection between relational brokenness and the desire for relational intimacy. He was willing to do whatever it took, even criminal activity, to get the attention of others. Participant IN2760 remarked, “It has played a huge role in my life, and I did not see it until now. This has opened my eyes and shown me that keeping bad relationships just to feel loved was a bad thing to do, and in doing so has led me to make even worse decisions.” His eyes were opened to the necessity of building healthy, God-honoring relationships, which can lead to better choices.

After reviewing the quantitative and qualitative data obtained through a mixed-methods research design, the Overcoming the Impact of Abandonment seminar increased the knowledge of the participants. In addition to increasing knowledge, the goal to minister to at least twelve inmates was met when eighteen inmates at TTCC completed the pre-survey, eight teaching sessions, and post-survey. All three project goals were achieved.

Strengths of the Project

Three strengths will be highlighted in this section. First, the ministry research project addressed the heart of the gospel. The foundation of the project came from the fourth cry of Jesus from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus experienced the weight of sin, depth of suffering, and separation of relationships to a greater degree than any human being has experienced. He knows, understands, and can relate to anyone, anywhere. As the Savior of the world, he can deliver people from their sin and devastating circumstances, although some consequences may not be removed from

one's life. The dying thief was redeemed, yet he never had a chance to reenter society and live a new life. Each session in the seminar maintained a gospel focus, whether discussing brokenness, repentance, reentering society, or God's design for the family. Participant ES2153 commented, "It has been a huge impact to know deeply that God loves me so much (John 3:16). And now I know I am never alone or hated because of Christ's love." Despite the depth of sin committed by the participant or committed against the participant, God's grace can save the vilest sinner and help the righteous sufferer overcome the impact of abandonment.

Second, the project addressed the root of addictions. Ed Welch contends that addiction is "bondage to the rule of a substance, activity, or state of mind, which then becomes the center of life, defending itself from the truth so that even bad consequences don't bring repentance, and leading to further estrangement from God."¹ At the heart of addiction, there is a lack of relationship with God, a desire to overcome relational brokenness with others, or the self-centered desire to pursue pleasure despite the responsibility to please God first and foremost (2 Cor 5:9). Often an addict might suggest he does not love himself; however, every action he takes in pursuit of the addiction proves that he is willing to do whatever it takes to please himself. The problem is a lack of genuine love for God and others (Matt 22:37–41). This project addressed God's pattern for relationships, pain associated with relational brokenness, and the need for lamentation, repentance, and new patterns of living rooted in a new and transformed heart. Participant IN2760 testified, "I see my life being lived in a cleaner and drug-free way. I also see me being a better father and even better son of God." He expressed how being drug-free would lead to being a better parent and child of God.

Third, the project interwove the life story of MOV's founder as proof that an

¹ Edward T. Welch, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave: Finding Hope in the Power of the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2001), 35.

inmate or ex-offender can overcome the impact of abandonment. Carl Carlson and his brother and sister were orphaned. Later, Carl would consider himself a “throw away kid.” These words describe how at one time Carl viewed his life. He did not belong to a family; he considered himself unwanted and an outcast in society. However, God gave Carl a new heart when he called out to the Lord Jesus Christ from his prison cell (Rom 10:13). Carl was not a perfect man. Those closest to Carl knew his faults. He was a man with a vision to serve God and others through ministry to troubled teens and incarcerated men. Carl’s life impacted people’s lives—from inmates behind the walls to men and women who worked in the skyscrapers in Nashville. In the final session, I shared a picture of Carl with a group of inmates. Several of the men in the picture have served or are continuing to serve through MOV. I also shared my story of meeting an ex-offender at church who introduced me to another ex-offender, Carl, at a prayer breakfast. As a twenty-three-year-old, I signed up to be a mentor to a man in prison. Carl Carlson’s life impacted mine. In his autobiography, his acknowledgments included over three pages of names of people who had helped him along the way. Carl was blessed to know Christ, raise a family, and build a multitude of relationships. He died as a man of valor and his story still inspires people today.

Weaknesses of the Project

One of the most significant weaknesses of the project was the brevity of the curriculum implementation. After spending two years working on the project, the curriculum was presented over the course of two days. Several ministry research projects addressed the difficulty of prolonged projects over a period of weeks and months, so I decided to increase the retention of participants by conducting the project over two days in one of the buildings at TTCC that had the highest concentration of MOV participants. This method served well to complete the project, but I presented a lot of information in two days. We spent some time discussing the content as a whole group, but the delivery

of the material did not leave much time for reflection. The value of extending the project over the course of a week or month is the ability to have more time to process the information.

Several factors were considered in implementing the project over a two-day period. First, the main chapel where most programming takes place is utilized each day of the week. Second, the chaplain's department was in transition. One chaplain was no longer with the company. An interim chaplain had been sent to TTCC for a five to six-week assignment. The remaining chaplain had taken on a new role with volunteers. A new chaplain was hired in mid-June. He had served as a reentry case manager and would be changing positions within a month. As the reentry case manager, he had access to a training room in W building. Third, my wife and I were expecting our fifth child. Therefore, my family life and the chaplain department were in transition. By God's grace, the project was implemented, but the brevity of its delivery hindered the ability to take a slower and deeper approach to the subject.

In addition, another weakness was the lack of diversity in the group, both in ethnicity and biblical literacy. The group had some diversity, but my desire was to reach men who had less understanding of the biblical principles presented. As stated previously, seventeen of the original twenty-one men were enrolled in a discipleship group. These men have a certain level of biblical knowledge, and the t-test proved the project increased the knowledge of the men. I was grateful for these participants. However, I believe the project could have had a more significant impact on participants had I been able to gather men from every building on the compound. While this would have been a feat, I believe the difference in the mean test scores between the pre- and post-surveys would have been greater.

Finally, the pre-surveys could have been administered in a more effective way. When the participants arrived for the first session, I was informed that the lunch call-out could come at any time. Likewise, commissary was being delivered. The men seemed

engaged but preoccupied. The pre-survey started by explaining how to create a personalized identifier code. The code was vital for comparing pre- and post-surveys. Next, I could have taken more time to explain each section of the pre-survey. Some men completed them quickly while others needed help from a fellow participant to read or understand in English. About ten minutes into administering the pre-survey, the men were called out to lunch. In the past, I taught a 1:00 p.m. class in the W building, and the men were able to attend the whole class before the lunch call-out. Several men finished the pre-survey before lunch, but others completed it after lunch. I was concerned the men felt rushed, which might have impacted the initial scores. The mode score for the belief assessment was “1” on question 17, “5” on question 18, and “6” on questions 19–32. At first, I was concerned the project would not quantify any increase in knowledge. If I had known lunch would have been called out within ten minutes, I would have waited until after lunch to administer the pre-surveys.

What I Would Do Differently

Overall, I gained a significant amount of knowledge in implementing this ministry research project inside TTCC. If able to do some things differently, I would first like to have each participant read through selected chapters of *Beyond the Walls* by Carl Carlson throughout the duration of the seminar. His testimony of evolving from orphan to criminal to family man and founder of Men of Valor continues to inspire people eight years after his death. The book is a Christian biography that men in prison could benefit from reading. Carl’s life story models how one can overcome the impact of abandonment, build God-honoring relationships, and live as a man of valor who makes a positive difference in the world.

Second, I would extend the seminar from two days of intensives to at least three to five days. If time and participant retention were not an issue, I would conduct the course over a period of eight to twelve weeks. There are four reasons I would extend the

teaching period. First, I would want men to have more time for reflection and to formulate questions that could add to group discussion at the end of each session. Second, I would conduct and analyze the pre-surveys prior to the first teaching session. After the first teaching session, I would conduct a group session to discuss the results of the family dynamic assessment. I believe sharing group information with the participants would serve to remind participants that they are not alone in their joys or sorrows. The family dynamic assessment provided basic information about parents' marital status, relational intimacy with parents, current marital status, and number of children. This includes addressing three generations of a participant's family. The participant's experience, combined with the revelation of God's design for life, marriage, and family in Proverbs 1:7–19, could enhance knowledge and provide understanding of the trajectory of one's family. Third, I would add a group session after the second lesson about experiencing brokenness. During this session, the group could discuss the results of the grief assessment. Data gained from this ministry research project revealed that over 70 percent of participants' biological fathers were incarcerated during the participants' childhoods. I would want to spend more time in group discussion and combine this time with personal and practical ways to lament. Last, I would add a reentry planning group session to discuss the development of a reentry plan.

Third, I would clarify question 17. Based on how it was answered, the question either needed to be rephrased, moved to the family dynamic section, or be removed. The question seemed neutral rather than having a distinct response of positive or negative.

Fourth, I would have offered a follow-up session for any participant who wanted to talk further about his life story. Participant EY0824 commented, "I feel encouraged to dig deeper into the root issues of my life." Most of the men will continue to attend chapel services, Bible study, and discipleship groups, but providing the opportunity to walk through one's life in light of the teaching might have been beneficial for some.

Theological Reflections

Throughout the development and implementation of this ministry research project, I have been able to reflect deeply on the life of Jesus. First, Jesus came down from heaven to walk among mankind. The apostle Matthew wrote, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (Matt 1:23). Jesus Christ, the Son of God, could have remained on the throne of heaven above creation’s corruption. However, out of love, the apostle John records, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The Son of God entered creation and walked among people with humility, grace, and truth. His example reminds me of the power of an incarnational ministry. Throughout my time at TTCC, I have witnessed the power of consistently ministering the Word through proclamation and the presence of my life.

Second, Jesus cried out during the darkness of the cross. He quoted Psalm 22:1, saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?” During his darkest hours, Jesus expressed his heart through the Scriptures as he cried out in faith. Like Jeremiah, Jesus was driven and brought into darkness without any light (Lam 3:2). As the light of the world and founder and perfecter of our faith, Jesus teaches us to walk by faith and not by sight in the direst circumstances in life (John 8:12; 2 Cor 5:7; Heb 12:2). God is faithful and can be trusted at all times (Ps 62:8). Though Jesus had no sin, he understood grief and offered up strong cries and tears to God. He teaches us to lament and follow him in the hope of brighter days (Prov 4:18).

Third, Jesus had compassion for a dying thief (Luke 23:34–43). Jesus was experiencing the greatest suffering in his life, yet he was thinking about a person’s relationship with God. When the Rock was struck at the cross, the living water of grace and forgiveness flowed to all who would believe (Num 20:8; 1 Cor 10:4). The dying thief heard the first cry of Jesus from the cross. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they

know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). One of the dying thieves responded to the good news, and Jesus offered him eternal life that day. Jesus ministered within the Roman criminal justice system. The two thieves beside Jesus were condemned by the government and would never be able to reenter society, yet Jesus knew these men’s needs were deeper than reentering society. The criminals needed to know how to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 4:17; 7:13). Today, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ provide a way of salvation for those who will never reenter society and for those who will have another chance. If the dying thief could have come down from the cross, saving faith would have displayed itself in a brand-new life. He would have had more than “jail-house” religion. His life would have been marked by love for God, fellow disciples, and society (Matt 22:37–40; John 13:34–35).

Personal Reflections

God’s sovereignty amazes me as I reflect on the opportunity to attend Southern and complete a ministry research project on overcoming the impact of abandonment on inmates at TTCC. The first word on the spelling list for my elementary and middle school spelling bee was a-b-a-n-d-o-n-m-e-n-t. I can remember working through the list over and over in my mind in preparation for the school spelling bee. As I look back on my life, I understand how relational brokenness impacted my home. By God’s grace, Jesus rescued me from my past and from being overwhelmed by grief.

Like Jeremiah, I know what it is like to be led into dark places of suffering. My greatest role model growing up, my grandfather, passed away in 2007. My wife and I suffered through miscarriage in February 2008, along with suffering the loss of three other babies in the womb. My dad passed away in May 2008. My parents had been married thirty-one years, and my mom struggled to overcome the grief. She passed away in March 2009, before my first son was born. My parents were both forty-eight at the time of their deaths. My grandmother would pass away in 2013, leaving me without any

living ancestors when I was thirty-three years old. Although dark seasons came into my life, new life has sprung up as my wife and I have welcomed five children into our home.

Since 2005, I have been pastoring churches in need of revitalization. The Lord has allowed me to witness believers grow in faith in the two churches I have served as pastor. The journey has not been easy. As a bi-vocational pastor, I have worked as a counselor at Nashville Rescue Mission and in the MOV Prison Ministry. I have walked among the broken as one broken and made new. Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Isa 53:3). He learned obedience through the things he suffered, and he overcame everything in life and through death (Heb 5:8).

I still wonder why I have been led into a great deal of pain, suffering, and grief, yet I know God has a purpose that is greater than I can imagine. I keep walking by faith. God was working when Jeremiah could not understand. The Lord Jesus Christ was working when the disciples were scattered and failed to understand (Matt 26:31). On the third day, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave changed everything and enables the believer's faith to rest in the power of God rather than the wisdom of men (1 Cor 2:5).

Finally, this ministry research project has reminded me of the importance of being present and engaged with my wife and children. I want to know God more and display his character among them (Exod 34:5-7). I want to pursue my wife's heart and model the love of Christ. I want my four boys and little girl to have a dad who points them to the Heavenly Father. My prayer for my children is for them to know Christ and always walk in obedience to him even when they cannot see light at the end of the tunnel (Prov 3:5-6; 3 John 1:4). God has always been faithful, and he always will be. He is my portion, my hope, and I pray, my greatest legacy in this world (Lam 3:24).

Conclusion

The emphasis of this project was to apply gospel truth to the relational brokenness inmates have experienced and have caused in others. God has provided both

the remedy to heal broken hearts and the power to transform relationships. Through Jesus Christ, participants have hope. Past failures can be overcome. Participants can have a new start even though some consequences may remain. The future can be bright. Participant EY0824 emphasized, “The abandonment of my past doesn’t shape my future.” He articulated the hope I desired to instill in every participant. Jesus knew the path he had before him and stated, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). Jesus had a cross to bear, and so does every person who will follow the Wise Son who leads the way to glory.

APPENDIX 1

ABANDONMENT IMPACT SURVEY

The following instrument is the Abandonment Impact Survey (AIS). The instrument's purpose was to assess each participant's present level of knowledge concerning the impact of abandonment. The AIS is divided into three sections to assess family dynamics, grief, and beliefs. The family dynamic assessment section has six questions. The grief assessment has ten questions. The survey concludes with a sixteen-question belief assessment measured on a six-point Likert scale. The Likert model was chosen to measure and compare the change in an inmate's belief before and after the ministry research project.

ABANDONMENT IMPACT SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to measure your knowledge concerning the impact of abandonment on your life. This research is being conducted by Brian Johnson, Men's Minister with the Men of Valor Prison Ministry at Trousdale Turner Correctional Center, for the purpose of collecting quantitative data for a ministry research project. In this research, you will answer questions before the project, and you will answer the same belief assessment questions at the conclusion of the project. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses.

Participation is strictly voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. Indicate below your agreement to participate in this project.

I agree to participate.

I do not agree to participate.

Identifier Code: This code will ensure anonymity while also allowing the opportunity to measure the results of the project.

_____ (1) last two letters of first name

_____ (2) day of birth (01–31)

_____ (3) first two numbers of your TOMIS number

Family Dynamic Assessment: Please circle your answer.

1. Which answer best describes your parents' marital status?
 - a. My biological parents were married.
 - b. My biological parents never married.
 - c. My biological parents divorced before I was 18 years old.
2. Which answer best describes your relationship with your biological father?
 - a. We had a close relationship.
 - b. He spent time with me on occasion.
 - c. He was not involved in my life.
3. Which answer best describes your relationship with your biological mother?
 - a. We had a close relationship.
 - b. She spent time with me on occasion.
 - c. She was not involved in my life.
4. Who did you live with while growing up?
 - a. Both parents
 - b. One parent
 - c. Someone other than my parents

5. What is your current marital status?
 - a. Single, never married
 - b. Married
 - c. Divorced: How many times? _____

6. How many biological children do you have?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3 or more: How many? _____

Grief Assessment: Place a check mark in the box that reflects your experience.

#	Question	True	False
7	My biological father was incarcerated during my childhood.		
8	I have been in contact with my biological children within the last 30 days.		
9	I was raised in a home that struggled to have enough money for food, clothing, or shelter.		
10	I have used drugs or alcohol to escape the pain of broken relationships.		
11	I have lost a friend due to drug overdose.		
12	I have lost a friend due to violence on the streets.		
13	I have a friend who is now incarcerated.		
14	The person(s) who raised me has passed away.		
15	I see the need to process my life story.		
16	I understand the value of grieving the suffering I have experienced.		

Belief Assessment: Answer the following questions by placing a check mark in the box that most closely represents your current practices or beliefs.

The scale is as follows:

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, DS = Disagree Somewhat,
 AS = Agree Somewhat, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.

#	Question	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
17	I believe I have suffered because of my parents' neglect of their responsibility to love me.						

#	Question	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18	I believe a loving father's involvement in my life might have kept me from many of the problems I faced in life.						
19	I believe I have been caught up in addiction (ex. drugs, alcohol, porn) to cover up the pain of broken relationships in my life.						
20	I believe my failure to follow God's Word has caused me to suffer consequences in my life.						
21	I believe Jesus Christ understands the painful circumstances I have endured in my life.						
22	I believe knowing God is the starting point for rebuilding my life.						
23	I know I have been saved by God's grace.						
24	I enjoy spending time with God by reading His Word.						
25	I believe God wants me to obey Jesus Christ no matter how hard life may become.						
26	I believe I can make a positive impact inside the prison by building friendships.						
27	I believe God designed man to be productive through honest work to provide for his family.						
28	I believe I need to become a man who can be trusted by my family.						
29	I believe I need to develop a good plan for reentering society rather than returning to my old way of life.						
30	I believe I need to find a biblically faithful church upon release to stay grounded in the good news of Jesus Christ.						
31	I believe I can be a man of valor—a godly man who loves his family, his church, and his community.						
32	I have hope for a bright future.						

APPENDIX 2

ABANDONMENT IMPACT INTERVIEW

The Abandonment Impact Interview consists of four questions and was used to gather qualitative data on participants after the eight teaching sessions. The first question addresses how the participant views the impact of abandonment on his life. The second question gives the participant the opportunity to share how the gospel can change his life. The third question addresses the participant's vision for the future. The fourth question is designed to understand a participant's potential to use his life story to minister to others.

ABANDONMENT IMPACT INTERVIEW

Agreement to Participate

The Abandonment Impact Interview is designed to gather qualitative data concerning the impact of abandonment on an inmate at Trousdale Turner Correctional Center. This research is being conducted by Brian Johnson, Men's Minister with Men of Valor Prison Ministry at Trousdale Turner Correctional Center, for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry research project. In this research, you will answer four interview questions at the conclusion of the eight teaching sessions. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses.

Participation is strictly voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. Indicate below your agreement to participate in this project.

I agree to participate.

I do not agree to participate.

Identifier Code: This code will ensure anonymity while also allowing the opportunity to measure the results of the project.

_____ (1) the last two letters of first name

_____ (2) day of birth (01–31)

_____ (3) first two numbers of your TOMIS number

1. How has abandonment (ex. “relational brokenness,” fatherlessness) impacted your life?
2. How has the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ brought hope into your life?
3. What vision do you have for your life knowing that in Christ, you can live a new life to the glory of God?
4. How do you think your story can be used to help others overcome the impact of abandonment?

APPENDIX 3
CURRICULUM EVALUATION TOOL

The curriculum evaluation tool was provided to an expert panel to evaluate the Overcoming the Impact of Abandonment biblical curriculum in four areas: biblical accuracy, scope, pedagogy, and practicality. The panel's feedback was used to ensure each area met the sufficient or exemplary level.

Name of Evaluator: _____ Date: _____

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
1 = insufficient 2 = requires attention 3 = sufficient 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Biblical Accuracy					
Each lesson was sound in its interpretation of Scripture.					
Each lesson was faithful to the theology of the Bible.					
Scope					
The content of the curriculum sufficiently covers each issue it is designed to address.					
The curriculum sufficiently covers a biblical pedagogical methodology.					
Pedagogy					
Each lesson was clear, containing a big idea.					
Each lesson provides opportunities for participant interaction with the material.					
Practicality					
The curriculum clearly details how to overcome the impact of abandonment.					
At the end of the course, participants will understand the necessity of knowing and obeying Jesus Christ to walk in spiritual freedom.					

APPENDIX 4

CURRICULUM EVALUATION PANEL

The following individuals formed the Curriculum Evaluation Panel: Heather Dillard, Alfonso Gilbert, Chad Vinson, and Matthew Haste. Their comments on the Curriculum Evaluation Tool are recorded in the following order:

Panelist 1:

Dr. Heather Dillard, associate professor in the College of Education at Middle Tennessee State University. Dr. Dillard submitted comments to the author on May 11, 2022.

Panelist 2:

Dr. Alfonso Gilbert, fellow prison minister serving as an adjunct professor at Grand Canyon University. Dr. Gilbert submitted comments to the author on May 22, 2022.

Panelist 3:

Dr. Chad Vinson, MOV counselor who received a Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Counseling at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Vinson submitted comments to the author on May 25, 2022.

Panelist 4:

Matthew Haste, associate professor of Biblical Spirituality and Biblical Counseling and Director of Professional Doctoral Studies at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Haste submitted comments to the author on May 18, 2022.

APPENDIX 5

ABANDONMENT IMPACT SURVEY
FAMILY DYNAMIC AND GRIEF
ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Table A1. Abandonment impact survey family dynamic and grief assessment results

Question and possible answers	No. of participants	Percentage
1. Which answer best describes parents' marital status?		
Married	10	55.6%
Never married	1	5.6%
Divorced before I was 18	7	38.9%
2. Which answer best describes your relationship with your biological father?		
We had a close relationship.	10	56.0%
He spent time with me on occasion.	6	33.0%
He was not involved in my life.	2	11.0%
3. Which answer best describes your relationship with your biological mother?		
We had a close relationship.	14	77.8%
She spent time with me on occasion.	3	16.7%
She was not involved in my life.	1	5.6%
4. Who did you live with while growing up?		
Both parents	9	50.0%
One parent	7	38.9%
Someone other than my parents	2	11.1%
5. What is your current marital status?		
Single, never married	2	11.1%
Married	5	27.8%
Divorced	11	61.1%
Total divorces for 18 participants	16	

Question and possible answers	No. of participants	Percentage
6. How many biological children do you have?		
0	2	11.1%
1	1	5.6%
2	8	44.4%
3 or more	7	38.9%
Total children among 18 participants	47	

Grief Assessment					
#	Question	True	%	False	%
7	My biological father was incarcerated during my childhood.	13	72.2%	5	27.8%
8	I have been in contact with my biological children within the last 30 days.*	10	55.6%	7	38.9%
9	I was raised in a home that struggled to have enough money for food, clothing, or shelter.	8	44.4%	10	55.6%
10	I have used drugs or alcohol to escape the pain of broken relationships.	15	83.3%	3	16.7%
11	I have lost a friend due to drug overdose.	9	50.0%	9	50.0%
12	I have lost a friend due to violence on the streets.	7	38.9%	11	61.1%
13	I have a friend who is now incarcerated.	11	61.1%	7	38.9%

Grief Assessment					
#	Question	True	%	False	%
14	The person(s) who raised me has passed away. ⁺	9	50.0%	8	44.4%
15	I see the need to process my life story.	10	55.6%	8	44.4%
16	I understand the value of grieving the suffering I have experienced.	14	77.8%	4	22.2%

*On question 8, one person did not have any children (1= 5.6%).

⁺On question 14, one person left the answer blank (1= 5.6%).

APPENDIX 6

PRE-IMPLEMENTATION BELIEF ASSESSMENT RESULTS

The following table provides the pre-implementation results for the eighteen participants who answered questions 17–32 on the belief assessment section of the Abandonment Impact Survey.

Table A2. Pre-implementation belief assessment results

Participant	Question																Sum
	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	
RY1460	1	6	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	90
AS1255	2	1	2	2	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	79
ON0463	1	6	4	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	88
AN1350	1	2	5	6	6	6	6	5	6	5	6	5	5	5	5	5	79
IN2760	1	5	1	6	6	6	6	6	6	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	84
TH0747	2	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	91
IN1857	1	2	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	87
ES2153	1	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	89
ES2663	2	2	6	2	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	61
IS0258	4	4	4	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	90
ME0968	4	5	5	5	5	5	6	5	5	4	6	5	4	5	5	5	79
EL2854	1	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	5	6	6	89
IS0253	2	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	5	5	6	6	6	6	6	89
EY0824	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	4	6	6	6	6	6	6	94
RD1862	4	4	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	92
EL1513	1	4	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	5	88
EL1922	4	6	5	6	2	6	5	6	6	5	6	6	6	6	5	5	85
NY1884	1	6	1	6	6	6	6	6	6	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	85
Average	2.20	4.40	4.80	5.40	5.70	5.80	5.80	5.80	5.80	5.33	5.83	5.78	5.72	5.72	5.72	5.67	
Mode	1	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	
Median	1.50	5.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	5.50	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	
Standard Deviation	1.50	1.60	1.70	1.30	1.00	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.77	0.51	0.55	0.67	0.57	0.57	0.59	

APPENDIX 7
POST-IMPLEMENTATION BELIEF
ASSESSMENT RESULTS

The following table provides the post-implementation results for the eighteen participants who answered questions 17–32 on the belief assessment section of the Abandonment Impact Survey.

Table A3. Post-implementation belief assessment results

Participant	Question																Sum
	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	
RY1460	1	6	1	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	86
AS1255	1	6	1	6	6	6	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	76
ON0463	2	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	92
AN1350	1	2	5	6	5	6	6	6	6	5	6	5	5	6	6	5	81
IN2760	1	4	2	6	6	6	6	6	6	4	6	6	6	6	6	6	83
TH0747	4	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	93
IN1857	2	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	91
ES2153	2	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	91
ES2663	3	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	93
IS0258	4	4	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	91
ME0968	5	6	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	93
EL2854	1	6	6	6	6	6	6	5	6	4	6	6	6	6	6	6	88
IS0253	2	5	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	90
EY0824	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	96
RD1862	5	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	94
EL1513	1	4	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	89
EL1922	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	95
NY1884	1	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	91
Average	2.70	5.20	5.00	6.00	5.90	6.00	5.90	5.90	5.90	5.56	5.94	5.89	5.89	5.94	5.94	5.89	
Mode	1	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	
Median	2.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.00	
Standard Deviation	1.80	1.10	1.70	0.00	0.20	0.00	0.20	0.30	0.20	0.70	0.24	0.32	0.32	0.24	0.24	0.32	

APPENDIX 8

T-TEST RESULTS

This appendix reports the statistical changes from the belief assessment section on the pre- and post-implementation surveys. A six-point Likert scale was used to measure the responses of the participants.

Table A4. T-test results

T-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>Pre-Test Total</i>	<i>Post-Test Total</i>
Mean	85.5	89.6
Variance	56.85294118	26.83986928
Observations	18	18
Pearson Correlation	.217596677	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	17	
t stat	-2.135777257	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.023770162	
t Critical one-tail	1.739606726	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.047540324	
t Critical two-tail	2.109815578	

APPENDIX 9

CURRICULUM: OVERCOMING THE IMPACT OF ABANDONMENT

The following eight lessons were used to teach participants about overcoming the impact of abandonment on inmates at TTCC.

The Patterned Life of a Wise Son (Prov 1:7–19)

Lesson 1

1) Outline

a) **Introduction: The Patterned Life of a Wise Son**

- i) Relationships are the most important aspect of our lives.
 - (1) The Great Commandment illustrates this point. Matthew 22:36–40
 - (2) God designed man to enjoy relational intimacy with him and in a natural and spiritual family.
- ii) Due to the effects of the Fall, some people with hearts hardened by sin abandon relational roles causing others to suffer the consequences of his or her negligence (see Rom 1:31 or 2 Tim 3:3 – “heartless” (ESV), “unloving” (NASB), “without natural affection” (KJV)).
 - (1) Defining Abandonment: Abandonment will be defined as the sudden or prolonged loss of relationship. It is the condition of “relational brokenness.”
 - (a) David Powlison – “To be abandoned or attacked brings anguish, heartbreak, and despair. To be used, misused, mistreated, and abused breaks us. But relational distance and breakdown are not always about traumatic events and are not always unilateral. Daily misunderstandings, disappointments, mutual incomprehension, minor slights, forgetfulness, and indifference can accumulate. Relationships get awkward for reasons that are hard to explain— unrecognized fears, hidden agendas, diverging interests. The human heart is breakable. So are families and friendships. So are churches and workplaces. So are communities and nations. This is the aspect of brokenness in view when people speak of “relational brokenness.”
 - (2) Overcoming the Impact of Abandonment – The purpose of this course is to address the impact of abandonment on inmates at TTCC in an effort to break the cycle of broken relationships, build healthy God-honoring relationships inside the prison, and prepare men to reenter society as men of valor.
 - (a) Carl Carlson– He was abandoned as a child yet founded of MOV Prison Ministry.

b) **A Wise Son Fears the Lord (Prov 1:7)**

- i) The fear of the Lord is the fundamental lesson in education.
- ii) The fear of the Lord defined –
 - (1) Submission to the authority, will and purposes of the Almighty.
 - (2) David Hubbard: “Fear” is best understood as “reverent obedience.”
- iii) The fear of the Lord is the starting point for aligning a person’s life according to truth and wisdom of God.

- c) **The Wise Son Listens to God-Ordained Authority (Prov 1:7–9)**
- i) Biblical Foundation of Marriage and Family – In biblical wisdom, a child would be born into a family where a father and mother were joined together in marriage. From this union, a child would enter the world to be nurtured and raised in the fear of the Lord.
 - (1) Biblical marriage illustrates trust and faithfulness. Within a biblical family, a child:
 - (a) receives parental guidance.
 - (b) enjoys belonging and acceptance due to sonship. “My son” is a term of endearment (Prov 1:8, 10, 15).
 - (c) learns to listen and humbly submit to authority.
 - (d) develops godly character. A humble disposition toward authority, integrity, and a life well-lived crowns a young man setting him up to be an overcomer in life (1 Jn 5:4–5).
 - ii) Unbiblical Foundation – Sin creates broken foundations. Children are born into broken homes due to the foolishness and pride of parents. Children can be fatherless, motherless, parentless and grow up without relational stability, parental guidance, acceptance, and discipline.
 - (1) Abandonment or “relational brokenness” can explain why:
 - (a) one has lived a certain way, but it cannot be an excuse to continue unbiblical patterns.
 - (b) one does not trust people and desires to isolate from others (Prov 18:1).
 - (c) one does not respect authority and refuses discipline.
 - (d) one repeats the same pattern with his children and grandchildren.
- d) **The Wise Son Rejects the Solicitation of the Streets (unruly relationships) (Prov 1:10–14)**
- i) A wise father prepares his son by encouraging him to stay on the straight and narrow road and warning him of the dangers in the world (Josh 1:7).
 - ii) A wise father knows temptations abound to seek the approval of others, throw off the discipline of work, and make easy money (Prov 1:10).
 - iii) The wise father pleads with his son to avoid the foolish ways of young men in the streets. The young men in the streets are the antithesis of God’s wisdom.
- e) **The Wise Son Avoids an Untimely Death (Prov 1:15–19)**
- i) Guidance – The wise father knows God’s heart and his law (Exod 34:6–7).
 - ii) A General Rule of Long Life and Blessings – Ex 20:12, Deut 5:16, Eph 6:2–3
 - (1) Wise children, who are god-fearing and adorned with gracious character, will, by general rule, enjoy the blessings of God and live longer lives than those who are caught up in criminal activity.
 - iii) Choices – The wise son comes to a moment of decision (Prov. 1:15).
 - (1) The wise father exposed the gang’s motive of temporary pleasures and love of money.

- (2) The wise father reveals the deadly trap gangs set for themselves (Prov 1:17)
- (3) The wise father loves his son and does not want to be at his burial. He desires his son to see through the empty promises of the street gang, a false family, and replicate the godly patterns of life into the next generation.

2) Conclusion

a) Closing Questions:

- i) What have been the blueprints in the homes of your parents or grandparents?
 - ii) What kind of blueprints have you established in your home?
 - iii) What kind of blueprints do you desire for your children and grandchildren?
- b) **The Need for Transformed Hearts** – Titus 3:3–7
- c) **Next Lesson:** Experiencing Brokenness (Lam 3:1–21)

Resources:

- Hubbard, David A., and Lloyd J. Ogilvie. *Proverbs*, vol. 15, The Preacher's Commentary Series. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1989.
- Powlison, David. "Speaking of Brokenness." *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32, no. 1, (2018): 63–82.

Experiencing Brokenness (Lam 3:1–21)

Lesson 2

1) Outline

a) **Introduction: What is Your Life Story?**

i) The life of Jeremiah–

- (1) Jeremiah expresses the personal nature of his suffering – “I am the man” (Lam 3:1).
 - (a) Each man has a story to tell about his life.
- (2) Jeremiah had been born and called to be a prophet during a dark time in Judah’s history.
- (3) Jeremiah remained faithful to his call, yet Judah failed to heed God’s message. He is commonly referred to as the weeping prophet.
- (4) Jeremiah, in poetic fashion, provides an honest assessment of the depths of his suffering and teaches one to cry out to God for relief and healing.

ii) The lamentation of Jeremiah: Jeremiah experienced brokenness as a result of Judah’s rebellion and God’s judgment.

- (1) Lament defined and explained:
 - (a) James Swanson – lamentation, mourning, sorrowful groaning, i.e., to be in sadness, with emphasis on emotional distress
 - (b) Concise Oxford dictionary – a passionate expression of grief
 - (c) Merriam-Websters Collegiate Dictionary – To mourn aloud, wail; to express sorrow, mourning or regret for often demonstratively; mourn
 - (d) Powlison – “Unbelief blames God for the bad things, curses him, walks angrily away, and sets about manufacturing other gods who might give us what we want. But faith is unafraid to credit God with controlling both the delightful and the bitter things that happen to us— and faith continues to seek the help of the One who alone can help us.”
- (2) Jeremiah’s suffering– J.A. Thompson – “He suffered both physically and emotionally probably more than any other prophet. He spent a night in the stocks and several periods in cisterns and prisons of various sorts. He experienced a plot against his life by the people of his own village. In addition, he suffered the ostracism and misunderstanding of priests, prophets, officials, and ordinary people over many years.”
- (3) Although Jeremiah was faithful to God’s calling, he suffered due to the nation’s idolatry and witnessed God’s judgment of Jerusalem in 586 BC. The bustling city of Jerusalem became a lonely place filled with mourning (Lam 1:1).

b) **The Experience of Suffering is Described as a Living Death (Lam 3:1–6)**

- i) Jeremiah has a personal story of brokenness – In Lamentations 3, Jeremiah, representative of the people of Judah, records his experiences of suffering which are common both in his case and in inmates who suffer due to their family or their personal idolatry and tragedies which are beyond their control.

- ii) Jeremiah has a painful story of brokenness – Jerusalem, a city of idolatrous people, deserved what she received. God’s righteous anger had been unleashed, and Jeremiah suffered “under the rod of his wrath” (Lam 3:1).
 - iii) Jeremiah knows God has led him into a dark place in his life (Lam 3:1–3).
 - (1) F.B. Huey – “The absence of God’s name in vv. 1–20 (except in v. 18) may have been intentional to emphasize the sense of abandonment and alienation from God.”
 - (a) He feels alone in the darkness, and he has more questions than answers.
 - (b) He is heartbroken, in misery, and depressed. He experiences this dark time in his life, and he does not see light at the end of the tunnel.
 - (c) He laments. This season may not appear to be a place of growth, but God is working.
 - iv) Jeremiah describes the intensity of the suffering as having an effect on his physical and spiritual vitality (Lam 3:4–6). Jeremiah did not know if he would live or die. He had been surrounded by the Babylonian army who could not be trusted to protect him. It was one of the hardest, most bitter, and distressing times in his life. It was a living death (Lam 3:6).
- c) **The Experience of Suffering is Described as an Inescapable Situation Full of Trauma and Bitterness (Lam 3:7–15)**
- i) Jeremiah describes his suffering as an inescapable situation which he could not find a way out (Lam 3:7–9).
 - ii) Jeremiah illustrates the fears associated with the traumatic event of Jerusalem’s destruction (Lam 3:10–12). Jeremiah did not know if he would live or die in this experience.
 - iii) Jeremiah describes the piercing nature of trials sent by God and the humiliation he faced as a result of trusting in God (Lam 3:13–15).
 - iv) Jeremiah concludes he has eaten a buffet of bitterness and grief and drank cup after cup of wormwood (Lam 3:15).
- d) **The Experience of Suffering is the Result of Human Depravity and was Difficult to Describe (Lam 3:16–21)**
- i) Jeremiah describes the humiliation of the experience (Lam 3:16).
 - ii) Jeremiah was looking for peace and had forgotten what it was like to be happy (Lam 3:17).
 - iii) Jeremiah had become accustomed to the misery and loneliness (Lam 3:18). As he thought on his experience, he wondered if anything would get better.
 - iv) Jeremiah’s greatest fears had been realized—misery, homelessness, and bitter and suffering (Lam 3:20). He found it hard to express his feelings, yet he lamented in faith.
 - v) Jeremiah provides a better remedy (Lam 3:21). As he was groaning and lamenting, he remembered the Lord’s character and found hope to guide him through the darkness.

2) Conclusion

a) Closing Questions:

- i) What is your story? Have you ever been honest to God and others about experiencing brokenness in your life?
 - ii) Who or what have you been turning to help you endure suffering?
 - iii) How can you relate to Jeremiah and the suffering he experienced?
- b) **Next Lesson:** Hope in the Darkness: Seeing the Character of God (Lam 3:22–39)

Resources:

- Huey, F. B. *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, vol. 16, The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993.
- Powlison, David. “Anger at God.” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 30, no. 2 (2016): 42–54.
- Swanson, James. *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997.
- Thompson, J.A. *The Book of Jeremiah: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdsman, 1980.
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Hope in the Darkness: Seeing the Character of God (Lam 3:22–39)

Lesson 3

1) Outline

a) **Introduction: Jeremiah Finds Hope in the Character of God**

- i) The people of Judah had experienced brokenness due to their unfaithfulness to God and idolatry. They had chosen broken cisterns which could hold no water instead of enjoying relationship with God—the fountain of living waters.
- ii) Relationships were broken, but Jeremiah remembers the Lord during his grief and this one action changes everything.

b) **The Character of God is the Foundation of Hope (Lam 3:22–24)**

- i) Jeremiah and the nation of Judah would have been left without hope if God had abandoned them forever.
 - (1) Robert Davidson – “All the great words of assurance come tumbling out: God’s ‘steadfast love’ (*hesed*), that constancy which means that he could never walk out on his people; his ‘mercies’, his warm compassion (*raham*, a Hebrew word that basically means the womb); and his ‘faithfulness’, that dependable support which will never let anyone down.”
 - (2) The LORD’s love remains the same when a man walks away (see Jesus love for Rich Young Ruler when he walked away, Mk 10:21).
- ii) Jeremiah knows God’s covenant love is sufficient to help him and others through this trial, because the Lord’s tender affections for his people never come to an end. In mercy, the Lord kept them from complete destruction.
- iii) Jeremiah understands everything will not be different overnight, but possessing a right heart in the midst of suffering will provide healing, renewal, and transformation. The past can be overcome.
- iv) Jeremiah knows the people of Judah have been displaced and driven out of the land, but he realizes the starting place for rebuilding their lives is trusting in the character of God whether in the ruined city of Jerusalem or dispersed among Babylonians.
 - (1) He knows he can be an overcomer by trusting God to bring good out of dark times.
 - (2) Do you believe you can be an overcomer despite your past?

c) **The Goodness of God (Lam 3:25–27)**

- i) God is good even when things in life are not good.
 - (1) Jesus tells the story of a wise and foolish builder in Matthew 7:24–28.
 - (2) What happened? Two men built houses which represent a person’s life.
 - (a) What did the two men choose to build on? Rock and sand
 - (b) What tested the strength of both houses?
 - (c) How did each house endure the storms?

- (d) Have you considered God's goodness in allowing your house to fall now, so you might have a second chance to rebuild your life on a solid foundation?
- ii) Jeremiah admonishes everyone to trust in the unchanging character of God. He has always been and always will be good, and since he cannot act contrary to his nature, everything he does is good.
 - iii) Jeremiah postulates that God's goodness is motivation for waiting on and seeking God (Lam 3:25).
 - iv) Through submission to God's will and trust in his timing, Jeremiah believed the people of God would be delivered from their calamity and once again see the goodness of God in their lives (Lam 3:26)
 - v) Jeremiah knew it was good for a man to be spiritually trained in his youth (Lam 3:27)
 - (1) Bear the yoke. F.B. Huey – Those who learn in youth to bear suffering are better prepared for the hardships that may come in old age.
 - (2) The yoke of Jesus (Matt 11:28–30)
 - (a) How were you taught to handle problems or suffering when you were growing up?
 - (b) What could you teach a younger man today about how to handle problems?
- d) The Omnipotence of God (Lam 3:28–30)**
- i) Jeremiah admonishes the people of Judah to sit alone in silence for the purpose of reflection.
 - ii) The people of Judah are unable to change their circumstances, but they can change their disposition concerning the situation.
 - (1) Have you been humbled by this experience?
 - (2) Have you heard about God's heart toward the humble? Ps 51:17, 1 Pet 5:6
 - iii) The nation had been humiliated by the Babylonians, but the Judahites could trust God's power to work something good through their physical suffering and overwhelming shame.
 - (1) God rules over all nations (Babylon, Judah, etc). He is all-powerful.
 - (2) God is an expert at bringing good out of bad situations—Joseph, Job, Jesus.
 - iv) Any unjust suffering the nation experienced would be rectified by the power of God (Lam 3:30).
- e) The Mercy of God (Lam 3:31–33)**
- i) Jeremiah recognizes the Lord has severely disciplined the people of Judah because of her sin, however, he reverts to the character of God and his abundant mercy based on his covenant love for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David.
 - ii) The Lord had driven the nation into grief, sorrow, and pain for the purpose of repentance and restoration.
 - iii) Better days were coming – Because of his promises, the Lord had an obligation to the rebuild the community. The overarching storyline of the

Bible had not been complete. A redeemer had been promised who would reveal the heart of God in the clearest sense.

f) The Justice of God (Lam 3:34–37)

- i) Jeremiah explains being taken as a prisoner as being crushed underfoot (Lam 3:34). The people of Judah, as prisoners of war, were taken into captivity due to their sins. Becoming a prisoner was an overwhelming and humiliating experience.
- ii) Jeremiah's appeal to God's justice is good news for the oppressed.
- iii) Jeremiah knew the LORD would hold the captors accountable for any injustice experienced. The people of Judah, made in the image of God, were more than a number in the Babylonian justice system and could find comfort in the God Most High who would hold both the captor and captive accountable for their actions.

g) The Sovereignty of God (Lam 3:37–39)

- i) The Ruler of the Universe had worked through the corrupt authorities in the world to accomplish His good purposes – The Lord, Adonai, is the powerful Creator of the universe who spoke everything into existence and continues to rule over the affairs of men (Lam 3:37).
- ii) God destroyed Judah's false hopes – All the false hopes of worshipping idols were exposed, and God's goodness was meant to lead them to repentance (Rom 2:4).
- iii) God desires the hearts of his people – The Lord had not been pleased with formal religious practices. He desired the people to have a heart to be in personal relationship with him.
- iv) Rather than complain about their calamity, both Jeremiah and the remnant of Judah should be thankful to be alive and able to humbly submit to the will and wisdom of God.
 - (1) Many people suffered due to the nation's idolatry.
 - (2) Many families suffer today due to generational unfaithfulness to the Lord.
- v) God's bigger story: Jerusalem was in ruins, but the city would be rebuilt. The Wise Son of God, Jesus Christ, would bring his glory city of Jerusalem and die outside the city gates as an atonement for sin to provide man with a solid foundation to build his life upon.

2) Conclusion

a) Closing Questions:

- i) Do you realize the most important relationship in your life is with God?
- ii) Which attribute of God has encouraged you the most today?
- iii) Do you believe you can trust God with your life?

b) Next Lesson: The Wise Son Who Leads the Way to Glory (Matt 27:46)

Resources:

- Davidson, Robert. *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, vol. 2, Daily Study Bible Series. Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1983.
- Huey, F. B. *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, vol. 16, New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993.

The Wise Son Who Leads the Way to Glory (Matt 27:46)

Lesson 4

1) Outline

a) **Introduction: The Gospel Reveals the Wise Son**

- i) The first Adam failed and every family has experienced varying levels of relational brokenness due to sin (1 Cor 15:22).
- ii) God was the first to proclaim the gospel – God proclaimed the good news of the Redeemer on the day sin and death entered the world, therefore, the world has been filled with the hope of the gospel from the beginning (Gen 3:15; Col 1:23).
- iii) The Last Adam is the Wise Son – Adam had been foolish by falling into temptation and disobedience to God. The last Adam, God’s wise Son would overcome sin and death and lead many sons to glory (1 Cor 15:45, Heb 2:10).

b) **The Wise Son Who Walked Through the Folly of this World**

- i) Jesus Christ, the Son of God, entered the world which was in opposition to his Father’s wisdom, and his life of wisdom would be under attack from the start.
 - (1) Jesus, God incarnate, was born into a dangerous situation. Before Jesus was two years old, King Herod sought to destroy him in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:13).
 - (2) Jesus had to move around in his early years of life from Bethlehem to Egypt to Nazareth (Matt 2:15).
 - (3) Jesus sought to please his Father throughout his life. At age twelve, Jesus desired to be in his Father’s house (Luke 2:41).
 - (4) Jesus grew in wisdom, stature, in favor with God and man under the authority of his parents. The perfect Son of God would be in submission to his parents and grow in wisdom (Luke 2:51–52).
 - (5) Jesus would walk in wisdom through every stage of life.
- ii) The life Jesus lived was filled with suffering and grief.
 - (1) Jesus was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa 53:3).
 - (2) Jesus witnessed the relational brokenness of the people in due to their ignorance of God– (John 1:10; Hosea 4:1–2).

c) **The Wise Son Experienced Abandonment from God and Man at the Cross (Matt 27:46)**

- i) At the cross, the Son knew the Father was close, and he revealed intimacy in his cries.
 - (1) During his first cry, Jesus interceded, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). The desire of Jesus’s heart for God-centered relationships is revealed in this statement. In this moment, he interceded on behalf of sinners who needed to be reconciled to God and to each other.

- (2) During his last cry from the cross, Jesus exclaimed, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46)!
- ii) The crucifixion was darkest day Jesus experienced in his life.
- (1) Jesus was crucified by the Romans at nine in the morning (Mark 15:25). At noon, the sun failed to shine, and a darkness came over the land (Luke 23:45).
- (a) Creation mourned.
- (b) The Creator solved the greatest dilemma – The wise Son of God, a man greater than Solomon, was silent as he experienced the darkest hours of his life, and yet he was working to solve the most difficult dilemma in the universe by providing a way for holy God to be reconciled to foolish mankind through an ultimate act of sacrificial love (Matt 12:42).
- iii) The cry of Jesus appeared to go unanswered.
- (1) Jesus spoke loudly. At three o’clock, Jesus gave his fourth cry from the cross.
- (2) Jesus exclaimed his fourth cry, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Matt 27:46)?
- (3) Jesus bore the weight of sin – Viewers of the cross often focus on Jesus’s physical agony, but his suffering went beyond the physical.
- (4) Jesus endured relational brokenness by trusting in the character of God.
- (a) Jesus’s disciples scattered.
- (b) Jesus’s natural family rejected his claims. (Matt 13:55; Mark 3:21).
- (c) Jesus’s legal father was absent. He may have died before Jesus was thirty.
- (d) Jesus’s mother, Mary, watched her son endure the cross. (John 19:25).
- (e) Jesus endured the shame of public opinion.
- (f) Jesus endured the brokenness of the criminal justice system (Luke 23:42–43).
- iv) At the cross, the Son experienced relational brokenness from the Father as he made an atonement for sin.
- (1) Jesus became sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.
- (2) Jesus suffered once, the righteous for the unrighteous, to satisfy God’s justice and provide a way of salvation to all who would believe – 1 Pet 3:18.
- (a) God’s justice system is not corrupt or broken, and sin, the failure to display godly love, must be punished.
- (b) Jesus had modeled the Father’s perfect love manifesting relational wholeness, thereby, allowing him to become a substitute for sinners who could reconcile God and man.
- (3) Jesus, with sacrificial love, willingly laid down his life on behalf of sinners, and the Father freely gave his son to accomplish redemption (Jn 3:16, 10:18).

- (a) Jesus quoted Psalm 22:1. Jesus said, “My God, My God” instead of “My Father, My Father.” He cried out to God when he felt his father was a million miles away.
 - (i) At the cross, the Father and Son were separated for an unprecedented time.
 - (ii) Out of love, the Father was offering up his Son, all the while, the Son, out of love was giving his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). The three persons of the Godhead were giving, loving, and uniquely experiencing the price of redemption as Jesus died to make the payment for sin.
 - (b) Jesus Christ experienced the weight of sin; he did not lose faith.
 - (c) Jesus’s experience of abandonment was physically and spiritually excruciating.
 - (d) Jesus knows the grief of sin and both physical and spiritual death. He lamented as he drank the cup of humanity’s selfishness and loneliness it creates (2 Tim 3:2; Prov 18:1). He was separated from his Father and separated from humanity.
 - (e) Jesus experienced the pain of outer darkness. The light of the Father’s countenance turned away from him for a moment, and he experienced the pain of outer darkness (Num 6:26; Matt 22:13).
 - (f) Jesus worships his God based on the truth of Scripture despite his circumstances.
 - (i) The righteous walk by faith, not by sight (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17) – He knows his Father loves him and his work on the cross.
 - (ii) The wicked rebel against God, his Word, and his will.
 - (g) Jesus Christ overcame the power of sin and relational brokenness, and his life provided an example for everyone to follow.
- d) **The Wise Son Overcame the Impact of Abandonment and Promised to Be with His People Forever (Matt 28)**
- i) Jesus finished the work of redemption he had come into the world to accomplish, and he committed his life into the hands of his Father (John 19:30; Luke 23:46).
 - ii) The Father would honor his Son in burial.
 - iii) On the third day, Jesus’s wise and righteous sacrifice was vindicated through his resurrection from the dead.
 - iv) Jesus overcame the impact of abandonment and restored his disciples to useful ministry. The Good Shepherd had not given up on his disciples. His love for them had remained, and he regathered them on a mountain in Galilee and gave them the Great Commission (Matt 28:16).

- v) Jesus gave his disciples an enduring promise.
- vi) Jesus promised never to abandon his disciples who follow him into the darkness of the world with the difficult task of making disciples. He promised he would never leave them and would be with them both now and forever.

2) Conclusion

a) **Closing Questions:**

- i) Quote John 3:16: What does this verse mean to you now that you have heard this lesson? Do you believe God loves you and desires to change your life?
 - ii) Are you willing to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus Christ today?
 - iii) How does the good news of Jesus give you hope for your life?
 - iv) Who else do you know who needs to know the meaning of the cross of Christ?
- b) **Next Lesson:** Reducing Recidivism through Repentance

Reducing Recidivism Through Repentance

Lesson 5

1) Outline

a) **Introduction:**

- i) Many people are impacted by incarceration.
(1) E. Ann Carson – US 1,215,800 people in state or federal prisons in 2020.
- ii) The cost of incarceration – The Tennessee Department of Corrections (TDOC) oversees over 50,000 men and women. The costs of incarceration are astronomical. From a financial perspective, the TDOC explains, “The department’s total operating budget for Fiscal Year 2021 was \$1,119,637,200.”
- iii) Criminal activity also costs families, communities, and government much more than can be quantified in dollars, and the costs continue to rise.

b) **Recidivism– the Revolving Door of the Criminal Justice System**

- i) Recidivism is defined as “the percentage of felony inmates who are re-incarcerated within three years of their release.”
- ii) Recidivism rates alone cannot be an accurate measure of changed lives. The problem is deeper than a behavioral issue.
- iii) Recidivism rates have been a concern of the criminal justice system for centuries. The British Journal of Criminology states, “Even as early as 1917 investigations have been carried out to get more insight into the question as to why some delinquents relapse into crime while others do not.”
- iv) Recidivism studies –
 - (1) Alper, Durose, and Markman – A study performed in a nine-year period from 2005 to 2014 indicated, “Five in six (83%) state prisoners released in 2005 across thirty states were arrested at least once during the nine years following their release.” Based on this study, eight out of ten former inmates reoffended within a nine-year period.
 - (2) A more recent five-year study was conducted between 2012 to 2017.
 - (a) Matthew Durose and Leonardo Antenangeli – “About 6 in 10 (62%) prisoners released across 34 states in 2012 were arrested within 3 years, and 7 in 10 (71%) were arrested within 5 years.”
 - (b) Within three years of release, the majority of former inmates reoffend. Durose and Antenangeli add, “Nearly 8 in 10 (79%) prisoners released in 2012 had been admitted to prison for a new court commitment, while just under 2 in 10 (18%) had been admitted for violating their conditional release to the community on parole or probation.”
 - (3) A study tracked former inmates from twenty-four different states for ten years, from 2008 to 2018. Antenangeli and Durose report, “About 66% of prisoners released across 24 states in 2008 were arrested within 3 years, and 82% were arrested within 10 years.”
- v) Recidivism rates reveal the high chances of reoffending, but the numbers also indicate a threat to families of the incarcerated and the general public.

- (1) Children of an incarcerated parent is SIX TIMES more likely to follow the parent's pattern.
- (2) The community becomes less safe – Continuous criminal activity devastates the lives of the perpetrator and the victims, and more needs to be done inside prisons, during reentry to society, and beyond.
- (3) Can the cycle be broken? How do these numbers impact how you feel about your future and the life of your children?
- (4) What are you willing to do different? How has Men of Valor impacted your life at this point of your incarceration?
 - (a) Men of Valor has recognized this problem. For men who come to Men of Valor's Discipleship Program and graduate, the recidivism rate is less than 15%. Hope for change is alive, but the road may be hard.

c) Repentance Toward God

- i) The world's measurement of success: The criminal justice system uses recidivism rates to measure success; however, recidivism measures are typically based on priorities other than biblical standards.
 - (1) Recidivism remedies primarily address behavioral modification and measure only the inmate's ability to stay out of prison for over three, five, or ten years.
 - (2) When addressing addiction, the primary concerns often become sobriety and the person's ability to remain free from drugs, alcohol, or other substance abuse.
 - (3) Abandonment may be measured by considering whether a parent pays child support or shows up on occasion, while neglecting to be present and engaged.
 - (4) A man may be faithful to show up to a job, but what is the quality of his work and concern for the relationships around him?
 - (5) In the world's system of measurement, God's righteousness is dismissed. As a result, the goals for inmates are distorted. God's desire for man is much deeper. He desires repentance in the depths of a man's heart and trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Rather than being motivated by self, God desires a man to be motivated to live for His pleasure.
- ii) God's measurement of success: God's righteousness
 - (1) Repentance is a disappearing doctrine in the church and foreign to the world.
 - (2) J.I. Packer defines repentance: The New Testament word for repentance means changing one's mind so that one's views, values, goals, and ways are changed and one's whole life is lived differently. The change is radical, both inwardly and outwardly; mind and judgment, will and affections, behavior and life-style, motives and purposes, are all involved. Repenting means starting to live a new life.
 - (3) Repentance toward God has been the primary message of the prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles, yet today, the doctrine appears unpopular, unprofessional, and uncommon in addressing the greatest

needs of the souls of man (Ezek 14:6; Joel 2:13; Matt 3:2, 4:17; Acts 2:38).

- (a) Repentance requires a reorientation of one's entire life toward God, which leads, by faith, to a whole new life before God and man.
- (b) The problem lies within the heart of man.
 - (i) Root – Desires or Wants, Thoughts, Affections
 - (ii) Fruit – Behaviors or actions
- (c) The heart is deceitful above all things (Jer 17:9)
 - 1. Explain the heart: (Understanding the Heart Diagram)
 - a. Desires: What am I wanting?
 - b. Thoughts: What am I thinking?
 - c. Affections: What am I feeling?
 - d. Actions: What am I doing?
 - 2. The hardened heart – Eph 4:17–19
 - a. The unbeliever walks in the futility of his minds – empty thinking, not considering the glory of God.
 - b. The unbeliever is darkened in his understanding. He fails to walk in the light.
 - c. The unbeliever is alienated from the life of God. He is separated from holy God.
 - d. The unbeliever has remained ignorance due to the hardness or stubbornness of his heart. He has remained firm in his ways and sought to get what he wants despite God's desires or the consequences of sin.
- (d) Godly sorrow leads to repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 7:10; Acts 20:21)
 - (i) The Holy Spirit works through the Word to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn 16:7–11).
 - (ii) Naaman initially refused to heed the prophet's remedy for the healing of his leprosy (2 Kings 5:1–15).
 - (iii) The Rich Young Ruler walked away from Jesus with a sorrowful heart. He loved his money more than Jesus (Matt 19:16–22).
 - (iv) Zacchaeus's heart was changed by Jesus Christ. He went from a greedy man in the community to a giver (Luke 19:1–10). Money no longer had a hold on his life.
 - 1. Genuine repentance will lead to a new life in Christ.
 - 2. J.I. Packer – “Repenting of any vice means going in the opposite direction, to practice the virtues most directly opposed to it.”
- (4) Repentance is a radical call to break away from an old life and turn to God for mercy, life, and hope for the future (Mark 9:43–50).
- (5) Repentance must take place prior to release.
 - (a) An inmate needs to plan for righteous living on the first day he is released.

(b) Some solutions might include changing friends inside the prison, attending Christian chapel services, and becoming involved in discipleship groups.

iii) Why do you want to change?

- (1) Repentance toward God and walking as a disciple of Christ Jesus becomes a higher motivation than seeking to please a family member, the mother of one's children, or another significant person.
- (2) When adverse situations arise in these relationships, the ex-offender can become tempted to escape to drugs, which opens a door to the criminal lifestyle. Ultimately, lesser motivations and unmet expectations can disappoint an ex-offender, yet a man who repents toward God and seeks to please him will never be disappointed (Rom 10:11).

2) Conclusion

- a) **Closing:** The Department of Justice spends millions of dollars toward crime prevention, public safety, the court system, and incarceration. Many solutions focus on behavioral modification based on the best observations of people throughout the ages. Many in the criminal justice system wonder what motivates people to do the things they do. The Bible, God's revelation, provides a clear picture of man's heart apart from sin. If a man fails to repent towards God, all change will be temporary, at best, and the recidivism rates will continue to maintain current numbers or increase. The next lesson will explain how man can be reconciled to God—the most important relationship a person can have.
- b) **Next Lesson:** Reconciliation: A New Standing with God

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Reconciliation: A New Standing with God

Lesson 6

1) Outline

a) **Introduction:**

i) A Story of Reconciliation

(1) Men of Valor – *Reconciling Men to God, their Families, and Society*. This has been the motto of Men of Valor since its inception in 1997. Carl Carlson had been orphaned as a child, rebelled against God and man, and ended up in prison where the Lord saved him and set him free. He was reconciled to God, and he sought to see others reconciled to God, their families, and society.

(a) Share the story of Carl’s brother, Philip, who first shared the gospel with him, and Carl’s son, Philip, who recently graduated the MOV program.

(b) All believers have been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18–20). Men of Valor Prison Ministry has a specific interest in ministering to men inside prisons and post-release.

b) **Reconciliation with God is Foundational to Overcome Abandonment.**

i) Abandonment or “relational brokenness” is the result of separation or alienation in relationships. Incarceration exposes the relational brokenness in an inmate’s life.

(1) David Powlison quote from lesson 1–

ii) Abandonment or “relational brokenness” is painful. The Lord Jesus Christ experienced the weightiness of sin and the suffering it produced as he experienced separation from his eternal Father and his earthly relationships.

(1) The pain of fatherlessness, absenteeism, and born into difficult situations.

(a) David Blankenhorn – “Death kills men but sustains fatherhood. Abandonment sustains men but kills fatherhood. Death is more personally final, but departure is more culturally lethal. From a societal perspective, the former is an individual tragedy. The latter is a cultural tragedy.”

(b) In an article on the effects of absenteeism, the authors emphasize that “separation as a result of parental incarceration may be even more detrimental than divorce and other forms of parent-child separation.”

(c) Lauren Beatty and Tracy Snell – “In 2016, most prisoners in the United States reported growing up in a home with at least one parent: 35% reported that they primarily lived with both parents, while 47% grew up in a single-parent home, primarily with their mother (41%).”

(2) The patterns of a man’s family can provide an *explanation* for the choices he has made, but the past cannot continue to be an *excuse* for continuing harmful patterns.

iii) Reconciliation with God creates a new standing with God

- (1) A man's (inmate) primary need is to know and walk with God. An inmate is a sinner and sufferer. He has been sinned against and has sinned against others.
 - (a) A description of a man apart from Christ –
 - (i) Weak –powerless to save oneself (Rom 5:6)
 - (ii) Ungodly – living without considering God in belief and practice (Rom 5:6)
 - (iii) Sinners – sinful behavior in rebellion to God (Rom 5:8)
 - (iv) Enemies – hostile and hateful toward God (Rom 5:10)
 - (b) A description of Christ's work on the cross –
 - (i) Christ died for the ungodly at the appointed time on the cross (Rom 5:6).
 - (ii) Christ died for us displaying God's love for sinners (Rom 5:8).
 - (iii) Christ died for us, while we were enemies, to reconcile us to God (Rom 5:10).
 - (iv) Christ lives for us securing our relationship with the Father (Rom 5:10).
- (2) A man who has been in and out of prison, addicted, abandoned, and engaged in worthless pursuits can come home to and be reconciled with the heavenly Father through the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ (Luke 15:18).
 - (a) Reconciliation defined:
 - (i) Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible – Restoration of friendly relationships and of peace where before there had been hostility and alienation. Ordinarily it also includes the removal of the offense which caused the disruption of peace and harmony.
 - (b) Reconciliation described:
 - (i) J.I. Packer – “Reconciliation of the warring parties is needed, but this can occur only if God's wrath is somehow absorbed and quenched and man's anti-God heart, which motivates his anti-God life, is somehow changed. In mercy, God the angry Judge sent his Son into the world to bring about the needed reconciliation.”
 - (c) Reconciliation displayed:
 - (i) Read the story of the prodigal (Luke 15:11–32)
 - (ii) Jesus performed this work on the cross, and the resurrection proved God's satisfaction with his Son's work of reconciliation.
 - (d) Reconciliation realized:
 - (i) The Savior stood in the sinner's place – (2 Cor 5:21).
 - (ii) Salvation is by grace through faith – (Eph 2:8–9)
 - (iii) Peace is the fruit of reconciliation – (Rom 5:1).
- iv) A man can become a son of God. At the point of saving faith, he becomes a son of God in union with Jesus Christ and in fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
 - (1) He is a new creation (2 Cor 5:17).
 - (2) He can cry out, “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15).

- (a) Gregory Cochran – “Now that the Spirit has helped us, we can cry out, ‘Abba, Father,’ to the only perfect father knowable on the earth. We call the living God our Father.”

c) Reconciliation with God is foundational to walk in spiritual freedom.

- i) Jesus Christ, the mediator between God and man, died on the cross to provide spiritual freedom.
(1) Ed Welch – “Our liberation comes through a person, not a system of ideas and principles.”
(2) The world’s system fails to understand the gospel, and, despite its good intent, misdirects inmates to a multitude of solutions that fail to provide the power to live a transformed life (Rom 1:16).
- ii) A man can be identified as a son of God, and his new identity brings freedom.
(1) He is no longer identified as a mere number given by the State.
(2) He no longer has to see himself as a product of the past or present.
(3) He does not have to be identified by his earthly family, neighborhood, or criminal record.
- iii) A man can set free from guilt, shame, and slavish fear (Rom 8:1, 15).
- iv) A man needs to be free of bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice (Eph 4:31).
- v) A man is to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving towards one another (Eph 4:32).

d) Reconciliation with God is foundational to rebuild relationships.

- i) Knowing God, then, sustains the believing inmate and encourages him to face the challenges of life. Because he is now a son of God, he desires to please his heavenly Father, who finds pleasure in his love for Christ and life of obedience.
- ii) With a firm foundation and growing intimacy with the Father, an inmate has the resources of the Word and Spirit to help him navigate his existing relationships and rebuild those which are in ruins.
(1) Of first importance, an man needs to consider his closest neighbors. He can practice Christian living with his cellmate or in the unit in which he lives.
(2) A man needs to be selective in developing close relationships within the prison, but he can find a man or group of men who are pursuing Christ.
(3) A man who knows God and learns to build godly friendships inside the prison is equipped to continue the process beyond the prison walls.
(a) He may be able to begin the reconciliation process with family members. Because he has been forgiven by God, he has a desire to seek the forgiveness of others (Eph 4:32).
(b) He will desire to join an evangelical local church where he can continue his spiritual progress, develop a godly support system, and patiently pursue relationship with his natural family.

- (c) He must be prepared to suffer well in the will of God. He must realize that some people will not be ready to trust him. Consider the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son.
- (i) An inmate may become aware of the pain of rejection, but his acceptance before God, the love of his spiritual family, and his close friends in Christ can provide the support he needs to patiently endure the suffering while he waits on God to restore his relationships. If family members are unbelievers, his life can be a witness to the saving grace of God and their great need for reconciliation.

2) Conclusion

a) Closing Questions:

- i) How does the story of the father's love in Jesus' parable change your perspective about God?
- ii) How does the attitude of the elder brother help you understand how others have or may treat you in the future?
- iii) How has God already been working in your life?

b) Next Lesson: Renewal: Viewing Problems Through a Biblical Lens

Resources:

- Beatty, Lauren G., and Tracy L. Snell. *Profile of Prison Inmates, 2016*. Bureau of Justice Statistics Report. NCJ 255037. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2021. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/profile-prison-inmates-2016>.
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Renewal: Viewing Problems through a Biblical Lens

Lesson 7

1) Outline

a) **Introduction:**

- i) Show the picture – Two Images in One.
 - (1) What did you see? Did you see one image or two images?
 - (2) How does our vision of God, ourselves, others, and the world around us impact how we choose to live our lives?
- ii) The aim of Christianity is continuous conformity into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29). An inmate who has recently repented and been reconciled to God stands in need of growth in grace (2 Pet 3:18).
 - (1) Timothy Lane and Paul David Tripp “Godliness is a God-honoring life from the time I come to Christ until the time I go home to be with him.”
- iii) A believing inmate has so much to look forward to in the future. However, he will require a renewed mind, a biblical worldview, to overcome the past and live in the present. We have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16).
 - (1) This lesson will help a new believer in prison develop a biblical worldview concerning three common problems inmates and ex-offender’s encounter.
 - (a) Identity
 - (b) Addiction
 - (c) Suffering

b) **An inmate needs to understand his new identity (Eph 1:3–14)**

- i) What are some of the labels or identities an inmate may have acquired?
 - (1) Inmates often carry a metaphorical badge and are identified by their crime. For example, some are known as drug dealers, thieves, murderers, sexually immoral, or frauds. These identities are based on their ungodly behaviors.
 - (a) See 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 – The apostle Paul described such a list of sinners; however, he stated the church members who used to be on that list now had been cleansed by Christ’s sacrifice and identified as His.
 - (2) Inmates are identified by the identification number given to them by the State. Like a Social Security number, an inmate carries his number for life. This number is used to sign into services and may be written on a man’s personal property for identification.
 - (3) Inmate may have tattoos on his body to symbolize his affiliation with a certain gang or group of people.
 - (4) Some inmates are identified by their home city or neighborhood. They are identified as criminals by society.
 - (a) These identities are true and can explain the inmate’s past, but Lane and Tripp note that, “in our blindness, we take on our problems as identities. While divorce, depression, and single parenthood are significant human experiences, they are not our identities.”

- (b) Explain: How does our identity impact our desires, thoughts, affections, and actions?
- ii) An inmate who has repented and been reconciled to God has a new identity.
- (1) Paul Tripp– “New life in Christ creates a new identity: being part of His glorious plan; being His inheritor; being empowered by Him; reigning with Him; being full and growing full by Him as we live in Him.”
 - (2) The apostle Paul’s first concern for the Ephesian believers were for them to understand their new identity in Jesus Christ.
 - (a) In Christ, a new believer is blessed, chosen, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, enlightened, an heir of God, and sealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:3–14).
 - (b) A believer’s new standing in Christ is the result of faith in Christ’s finished work for the purpose of glorying in the grace of God (Eph 1:6, 12, 14).
 - (i) Gregory Cochran – “Identity, in the sense in which we are speaking about fatherhood, requires an intentional name bearing which requires the offspring to display the character of the father.”
 - (ii) A believing inmate’s new identity in Christ becomes the source of new behaviors because the desires of a Christian are to please his heavenly Father.
 1. While the criminal justice system may never clear an inmate’s record, a believing inmate’s record is cleared in heaven.
 2. Family, friends, and the community may continue to look at the ex-offender through the lens of their past, but the believing inmate who knows his new identity can face his problems with confidence in the help of God.
- c) **An inmate needs to see addiction to drugs and alcohol as a life-dominating sin and an escape from reality (Prov 23:29–35)**
- i) The Portrait of a Drunkard – Solomon described the life-dominating sin of drunkenness over 3,000 years ago.
 - (1) The Description of a Drunkard: Six Questions that Expose a Problem (Prov 23:29)
 - (a) Everyone has problems in life – Who has woe, sorrow, strife, complaining, wounds without cause, or redness of eyes?
 - (b) No one has to add to his problems in life by escaping to false gods.
 - (i) Ed Welch defines addiction as “bondage to the rule of a substance, activity, or state of mind, which then becomes the center of life, defending itself from the truth so that even bad consequences don’t bring repentance, and leading to further estrangement from God.”
 - (ii) Secular sources overlook a person’s need to know, love, and enjoy relationship with the true God.
 - (iii) Timothy Lane – “Scripture tells us that the inner person (the heart) and what it craves, treasures, wants, fears and lives for is the ultimate driver of addictive behavior.”
 - (2) The Deception of a Drunkard (Prov 23:30–33)

- (a) A drunkard does not want to say “no!” and carries around wine (Prov 29:30).
 - (i) Mark Shaw – “Quite simply, physical addiction occurs when you repeatedly satisfy a natural appetite and desire with a temporary pleasure until you become the servant of the temporary object of pleasure rather than its master.”
- (b) A drunkard pursues or lusts for what the mixed wine has to offer (Prov 29:30).
- (c) A drunkard desires the strong, sparkling, smooth taste of alcohol (Prov 29:31).
- (d) A drunkard is deceived by the very thing he thinks will help (Prov 29:32). It bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. The drunkard experiences piercing pain and his pursuit can become deadly.
 - (i) Who has lost a loved one or close friend due to drugs or alcohol?
- (e) A drunkard loses a clear perspective on life and communicates the perversity of his heart (Prov 29:33).
- (3) The danger of a Drunkard (Prov 23:34–35)
 - (a) A drunkard forgets his positions of responsibility (Prov 23:34).
 - (i) Who had a father, mother, or some close relative to abandon you due to his or her addiction or were the ones who introduced you to drugs or alcohol?
 - (b) A drunkard may not feel the pain or consequences of his choices for some time (Prov 23:35).
 - (i) The addict desires physical and psychological pleasure, denies the truth, and continues to repeat his actions despite relational consequences with God and others.
 - (c) A drunkard sobers up only to pursue his desires again (Prov 23:35). The life dominating sin of addiction controls a man’s life.
 - (i) When an addict becomes willing to pursue drugs and substances with reckless abandon, his selfishness creates many victims.
 - 1. Charles Hynes – “One-third of state prisoners reported that they had committed their current offense while under the influence of drugs.”
- ii) The power to overcome addiction comes through a Person—the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - (1) An inmate must understand God’s desire to be in relationship with them. Lesson 4 explained how Jesus Christ experienced our sin—the problems of sin and suffering in our lives—to break the power of sin and death in our lives.
 - (2) An inmate must gain a biblical perspective on the nature of sin and how it has impacted the actions of his parents, his own, and those around him.
 - (3) An inmate needs an environment where temptations are removed. In prison, temptations abound. The inmate will need a temptation plan
 - (4) An inmate must be willing to be honest about the desires of his heart and take ownership of his actions.

- (a) David Powlison – “Somehow, in the way God runs his universe, our willingness to enter into the experience of pain, disappointment, loneliness, hurt, and stress—being willing to face it and not bolt for some lesser pleasure—winds up being the door to the greatest pleasure of all. And with the best come all the other true pleasures, felt deeply.”
- (5) An inmate must trust God to help them work through his problems one day at a time. Freedom can be found.

d) An inmate must learn to suffering well in the will of God.

i) Inmates have many problems to navigate.

- (1) He may have social problems due to past relationships.
- (2) He may have financial problems due to fees, fines, or child support.
- (3) He may have difficulty finding a job.
- (4) He may be filled with grief over friends who remain in the lifestyle he has escaped.
- (5) Problems may at times seem insurmountable.

ii) Jesus Christ, the Wise Son of God, learned obedience through the things he suffered.

- (1) [7] In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. [8] Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. (Heb 5:7–8).
- (2) Howard Dial – “At least two qualities were a part of Christ’s attitude toward suffering— acceptance (Matt. 26:39) and endurance (Heb. 12:2). His endurance exemplified itself in His forgiving spirit, concern for those suffering around Him, and a clear sense of purpose.”

iii) An inmate who comes to Christ must understand that all of his problems will not be erased. His heart has changed. His perspective has changed. He has a new life, but he must take ownership of his problems and work through them in the will of God.

- (1) A believing inmate must remember his joy is rooted in his new position in Christ, not in the absence of problems.
 - (a) John Piper – “But happiness in suffering signals the value of God. Suffering and hardship joyfully accepted in the path of obedience to Christ show the supremacy of Christ more than all our faithfulness in fair days.”
- (2) A believing inmate who joyfully accepts his responsibilities and endures will be a bright witness in the world.
 - (a) He can turn to God for help in prayer and in the Word (Jas 1:3–5)
 - (i) Heather Rice – “Turning from self and choosing the way of faith in any given moment is a whole lot less scary when you realize that what you find at the end is nothing short of the Father’s warm embrace.”
 - (b) He can turn to fellow believers for help.
 - (c) He can turn to others in authority over him for help.

2) Conclusion

a) **Closing Questions:**

- i) How do you see yourself today in light of God's truth?
- ii) What have you learned today about the biblical view of addiction?
- iii) Have you ever considered how Jesus suffered though he never sinned? He had no sin of his own, yet he was surrounded by others who did and lived in a world which groaned under the weight of sin.

b) **Next Lesson:** Reentering Society and Overcoming the Impact of Abandonment

Resources:

- Cochran, Gregory C. "Remembering the Father in Fatherhood: Biblical Foundations and Practical Implications of the Doctrine of the Fatherhood of God." *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 1, no. 2 (2011): 12–22.
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Reentering Society and Overcoming the Impact of Abandonment

Lesson 8

1) Outline

a) **Introduction**

i) Brief review

- (1) Lesson 1– The Pattern Life of a Wise Son (Prov 1:7–19)
- (2) Lesson 2– Experiencing Brokenness– (Lam 3:1–21)
- (3) Lesson 3– Hope in the Darkness: Seeing the Character of God (Lam 3:22–39)
- (4) Lesson 4– The Wise Son who Leads the Way to Glory (Matt 27:46)
- (5) Lesson 5– Reducing Recidivism through Repentance
- (6) Lesson 6– Reconciliation: A New Standing with God
- (7) Lesson 7– Renewal: Viewing Problems through a Biblical Lens
- (8) Lesson 8– Reentering Society and Overcoming the Impact of Abandonment

ii) An inmate who finishes his sentence will be released back into society. From July 2020 through June 2021, the Tennessee Department of Correction released 11,875 inmates back into the free world.

- (1) Personal experience – Can you imagine your first day of reentry? Last year, I was privileged to pick up several of the men who were released from Trousdale.

b) **An inmate needs to prepare to reenter society and break the cycle of broken relationships.**

i) Daily preparation:

- (1) Preparation for reentering society does not begin the day one is released. Preparation for reentry begins today.
- (2) A man who desires change will be walking in repentance and faith long before he makes the final walk through intake and outside the gate of the prison.
- (3) A man's Christian character must be developed inside the prison in preparation for reentry. Jesus grew in wisdom, stature, favor with God and man (Luke 2:52).
 - (a) How are you growing in wisdom?
 - (b) How are you growing in stature? Are you taking care of your physical health?
 - (c) How are you growing in favor with God?
 - (d) How are you growing in favor with man?
 - (i) What would others say about you inside your housing unit? See Prov 22:1
 - (ii) Have you developed good relationships among those who can be trusted?
 - (iii) Have you attended services with the Christian community at Trousdale?
 - (iv) What kind of character report do you have among the facilities staff—chaplain, correction officers, case managers?

- ii) Future plans:
 - (1) Do you have a good plan for reentry?
 - (a) Prov 16:9 The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.
 - (i) Family – What does your family say about your plan?
 - (ii) Half-way house – Does the place have a good reputation?
 - (iii) Men of Valor – This non-profit Christian ministry was established, because the founder saw men released from prison with a white pullover shirt, a pair of khakis, and a white mess bag walking out of the gate of the local jail without a plan or place to go. Too many men go back to the same environment which lead them into incarceration in the first place.
 - (2) Have you allowed wise friends to review your plan and speak into your life?
 - (a) Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety (Prov 11:14).

c) An inmate needs to understand his God-ordained roles and responsibilities while making a positive impact on society.

- i) Has the State of Tennessee placed any stipulations on your concerning your release?
 - (1) Have you flattened your sentence?
 - (2) Will you be released on probation or parole?
 - (a) View probation officers and the parole papers as a form of accountability toward God-ordained authority (Rom 13:1–6)
- ii) How are you prepared to take care of your basic needs?
 - (1) Food, clothing, and shelter.
 - (2) Bruce Western – Experts on mass incarceration in America “define the first steps to social integration as the development of family relationships, finding a place to stay, and obtaining a means of subsistence.”
- iii) Are you currently married? What is the status of this relationship? Have you communicated with one another regarding your release?
 - (1) Since you have completed this course of overcoming the impact of abandonment, how do you value your commitment to God and your spouse to do what is right and good before God.
 - (2) Jesus can be trusted, because he remained faithful to God through the greatest suffering and darkest time anyone has ever faced in life. Your spouse needs to know you can be trusted and will not run away from conflict or problems. She needs to know you will love God, her, and others despite the pain (Eph 5:25)
- iv) Do you have children?
 - (1) Do you have a realistic plan for when you might be able to see them?
 - (2) Love is patient. Are you willing to wait and trust God to reestablish these relationships?
 - (3) Do you have back-pay due for child support?
- v) Do you have other financial obligations?

- (1) Run a credit report if necessary and see what financial obligations.
- (2) Start with paying the smallest bills.
- (3) Call and negotiate a pay-off amount or a payment plan.
- vi) Remember Zacchaeus. He obtained a gift from God which money could not buy. His actions revealed the seriousness of his heart change.
 - (1) [8] And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” [9] And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. [10] For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:8–11).

d) A believing inmate has the hope of Christ and understands the call of discipleship.

- i) A believing inmate has the hope of Jesus Christ and the promise of his abiding presence (Matt 28:20).
 - (1) Read Col 1:27. 1 John 4:4, Rom 8:35–39
- ii) A believing inmate understands the call of discipleship.
 - (1) Read: Matt 16:24–27
 - (a) Reentry can be stressful. (Ex. Men describe going to Wal-Mart for the first time.
 - (b) Reentry can be full of temptations (1 Cor 10:13)
 - (c) Reentry can be one of the greatest blessings in a man’s life. He has the ability to walk out of prison and leave his past behind and work toward rebuilding a future that brings pleasure to God.
 - (d) Reentry will not be easy.
 - (i) Men of Valor’s Admissions Director tells everyman he interviews that coming to Valor Ridge will be the hardest thing he has ever done.
 - (ii) Overcoming the impact of abandonment and rebuilding relationships will take patience, endurance, and the ability bear one’s cross well in the will of God. Jesus suffered
- iii) Most inmates will reenter society and will display the true nature of his heart.

When Jesus was hanging on the cross, there were two criminals on each side of him.

 - (a) It must be noted that some men do not desire to change. Every man needs help, but some have not become aware of their greatest need: salvation by grace through faith (Eph 2:8–9). Jesus offered forgiveness to both criminals on the cross. One criminal’s heart was convicted by the holiness of Christ, and he understood Christ to be the King of the Jews and all nations (Luke 23:42).
 - (b) The other criminal witnessed the atonement but remained unchanged in the face of death. His heart was hard and in rebellion toward God in the face of the worst consequence. He died without hope in this world or in the next.
- iv) A believing inmate must keep perspective. Remember Jeremiah.

- (1) Jeremiah walked among the ruins of Jerusalem. The work seemed impossible. Jeremiah knew God’s mercies were new every morning; he knew God was faithful (Lam 3:23). Although Jeremiah did not live to see the city of Jerusalem rebuilt, future generations witnessed the glory of God walking in its midst. The greatest glory happened outside the city gates, where the Lord of glory was crucified to identify with the sinner’s plight (Heb 13:12–13).
- (2) A life of faithfulness impacts future generations more than we will ever know.

2) Conclusion

a) Closing

- i) God took an orphan who lived from Oregon to Florida and places in between and used his life to impact mine. For the last 18 years, I have volunteered and worked with Men of Valor. God transformed a former inmate into a man who has impact both my life and countless others. He overcame the impact of abandonment, though he wrestled with the pain at times, and served God through this little ministry called Men of Valor. Never underestimate how God can take imperfect people and write a beautiful story of redemption. He still writing our stories—I pray we will all be overcomers!

b) Next: Complete Post-Survey

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ABSTRACT

OVERCOMING THE IMPACT OF ABANDONMENT ON INMATES AT TROUSDALE TURNER CORRECTIONAL CENTER

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022
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The purpose of this ministry research project is to address the impact of abandonment on inmates at Trousdale Turner Correctional Center in an effort to break the cycle of broken relationships and prepare men to reenter society as men of valor. Through the implementation of an intensive discipleship curriculum, this project helps inmates better understand the subject of abandonment and provides them hope through the gospel. Chapter 1 presents a brief history of the Men of Valor Prison Ministry, its context within the prison, and the goals of this project. Chapter 2 provides the exegesis of three passages of Scripture that can aid an inmate in overcoming the impact of abandonment (Prov 1:7–19; Lam 3:1–39; Matt 27:46). Chapter 3 addresses the unique challenges and needs faced by inmates. Chapter 4 describes the project and its implementation. Chapter 5 evaluates the project based on the completion of the specified goals.

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BA, Union University, 2002
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MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT

Pastor, Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church, Goodlettsville, Tennessee,
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