

June 18, 2023 by Steve Brandon



My Weekend in Jail

Hebrews 13:3

1. Came by invitation
2. Felt like a missions trip
3. Followed a divine mandate (Heb 13:3)
4. Blessed me (Acts 20:35)
5. Was spent with Jesus (Matt 25:40)
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7. Will come again

As most all of you know, I spent this past weekend in jail. Not because of a crime that I committed. I wasn't arrested for DUI or domestic violence. I was in the jail on a Spiritual Impact Weekend, serving with Rockford Reachout Jail Ministry. The jail is located in the Winnebago County Justice Center, in downtown Rockford. We had twelve of us from the outside, spend time with 28 residents on the inside of the jail.

The heroes of this weekend are the two guys on the front line, John Evans and Dave Thurman. These two guys are chaplains in the prison, who have worked long and hard in the prison. Dave has been a prison chaplain for more than 20 years. These two men have gained great favor the administration in the jail, who sees the work that they do and the positive effect that it has upon the entire jail. These two men are the ones have opened the door to make a weekend like this possible. They have scheduled these weekends to occur every three months, four times a year.

This weekend is the 19th weekend over the past handful of years that Rockford Reachout Jail Ministries has been spent in the jail like I did this weekend. It's called a "Spiritual Impact Weekend," in which those men in the jail who have demonstrated a spiritual interest and commitment to Christ, have come together for a weekend to be encouraged and strengthened and challenged in their walk with Christ.

It's John and Dave who invite these men to My Weekend in Jail on the weekend. They lead countless Bible studies every week, and those who would be most helped by the weekend are invited to come. Of the 28 participants, my guess is that 8-10 of them have been on another Spiritual Impact Weekend. For the rest of them, this was the very first time.

We spent our weekend in a pod in the Winnebago County Jail. It consists of 33 rooms, with an upper deck and a lower deck. There are steel picnic tables in the big room that connects everything. There are televisions (which were turned off during our weekend). The inmates (or, "residents" as we called them) were dressed in jumpsuits. The various colors of the jump suits represented whether they were in jail for a state crime or for a federal crime. For this weekend, the residents are taken out of their pods, to spend the weekend in the same pod.

The weekend began on Thursday evening, when we spent a few hours kicking off the weekend. We spent all day Friday and all day Saturday in the jail. The team is returning this morning, but I skipped out to be here. I plan on returning quickly after our service for our wrap-up testimony time, which I am greatly looking forward to. These men have become friends, I'm looking forward to seeing them one last time.

My message this morning is entitled, "My Weekend in Jail." My message this morning is totally topical. I don't have a main text at all. By way of outline this morning, I simply have a large laundry list of items that I would like to address. I have seven points this morning. They are going to come fast and furious. So, get ready. First off, My weekend in jail,

1. Came by invitation

Gary invited me to join with the group during this weekend. I evaluated my schedule and the time involved, and decided that I could do it. I talked with my wife. I talked with the elders. And I was able to go. I know that several of you have received invitations by Gary as well. Perhaps my message this morning might be the push you need to join him on a weekend at some point in the future. Although, you don't need to be invited by him.

If you would like to come on another weekend, you can simply talk with Gary about coming sometime. And he can "invite you" to come as well. In fact, right here in my message, I want to make it clear what one of my aims in this message is. I want to convince some of you men to join in a weekend at some point. It would be helpful for your spiritual growth. It would be helpful for our church.

My second point, My Weekend in Jail,

2. Felt like a missions trip

Except I get to come home each night. When you go on a missions trip, you are doing three things,

1. You are going to an unfamiliar place.

2. To people who look different than you look.
3. To those who are needy and glad to see you.

All of this is true in going to the jail. A jail pod is unfamiliar to almost all of us. How many of you have ever been to a place like this? And the people in the pod look different than I look. Not so much in their person, for they are all Americans, who look like people you would meet at Walmart. But their uniforms set them apart, and make them look differently than I do. They wear big and baggy jumpsuits and sandals.

Everyone in the pod is needy. They all know that they are in jail because of wrongs that they have done. They all recognize their sin. Those we visited all have made a profession of faith in Jesus. And they are glad that we have come. In fact, every day when we enter that back door, all 28 of the residents begin to spontaneously clap, in appreciation that we have made the effort to come and visit them, and will come with help in their walk with Christ.

Another reason they are thrilled that we have come, is that their week is a bit like a weekend vacation for them. Staffing levels at the Winnebago County Jail are very low. In speaking with those who participated this weekend, it is often the case that the residents in the jail will spend the majority of their waking hours in their rooms, having only limited time in the common area.

I talked with several residents who were recently on lock-down this past month because of some disturbance in the pod. In one instance, it was 24 hours a day in their rooms for two weeks. For another guy, it was 24 hours a day in their rooms for one week. The guy who spent two weeks on lock-down, didn't have a cell mate, which made the time difficult. The guy who spent a week on lock-down had a cell mate, which made the time difficult, sharing a room that is six feet by eight feet. It's pretty cramped. But during a spiritual impact weekend, the residents are in the common area for more than 12 hours a day, talking with others with others about Jesus. And unlike their normal pods, where one man described it as "chaos."

Everyone in this pod this weekend is encouraging to one another. One resident told me that the first weekend that he experienced, he was "overwhelmed by the positivity" of the weekend. It's just so different than what they normally experience. Another resident gave testimony last night of how he has been incarcerated for 7 years and this is "the best thing he experienced." They are eager and excited that we come to the jail for the weekend, just like those on the mission field are glad that we have come.

Now, one final way that it was not like a missions trip is that I felt far safer this weekend than have on any missions trip I have taken. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that the missions trips that I have taken have intentionally to hard places, like India and Nepal, where missionaries are not welcome, and where it is illegal to convert people to Christianity. And so, I'm coming into the country, trying to be coy regarding my true intentions coming into the country. Certainly, I'm coming in as a tourist. But I'm going to spend my time touring the churches and teaching the pastors. But the fact remains, that I felt far safer in the jail, than I have at the airport in Kathmandu. So, men, if you want to take a missions trip in three months, talk to Gary.

My third point: My Weekend in Jail,

3. Followed a divine mandate (Heb 13:3)

If you have your Bibles, I invite you to open them to Hebrews chapter 13. To catch the context, I want to begin reading in verse 1.

Hebrews 13:1

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

These three verses contain three commands. All of these commands have to do with love. The first command has to do with love within the body of Christ, "brotherly love." It's a command to love other Christians. The second command has to do with loving strangers. The word translated "hospitality" in verse 2 is literally, "love of strangers." It's a command to love those outside the church, probably those from other cities. The third command has to do with loving "those who are in prison."

Hebrews 13:3

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

In the context of Hebrews, these are certainly imprisoned believers, who are imprisoned for their faith. which is not the situation in the Winnebago County Jail. The inmates there are in jail because of crimes that they have committed against the state. Yet, they are professing believers. and they are worthy to be remembered, as going through some very difficult times. When we arrived at the jail on Thursday evening, each of us went around and introduced ourselves by telling three things about ourselves. Our name, where we are from, and why we are at the Spiritual Impact Weekend. When it came to my turn, one of the things that I said was that I was there to tell the residents that they are not forgotten by the outside world. "But I'm here because we remember you." When I said that, there was a verbal affirmation on the part of many of those who were there. They were super-encouraged when I said that we on the outside remembered them enough to spend a weekend with them.

Hebrews 13:3

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

And there's no better way to remember them as being in prison, than going into the prison and meet them to encourage them. and experience everything that they experience on a daily basis. And it's not easy to be in jail. To keep tempers down, the pods are kept at a very cold temperatures. The air conditioner is always on. There's a constant hiss in the background, all day long, all night long. When in the jail, I

was in jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. Though I was comfortable in the jail, it was refreshing each night to get out of the cold, and into the warmth of the rest of the building. It was nice to get into the warm car at the end of the day.

It's not easy to be in jail. The lights are never off. When it's time for bed, they dim the lights, but not enough for an officer to be able to look into the window and check on the inmate every half-hour. It's not easy to be in jail. The food isn't so good. During our days, we ate the jail food. It's tolerable. But it sure was nice to come home and get some home-cooking. It's not easy to be in jail. You never see the sun. You may take this for granted.

Spending one day without looking outside, was enough for me. It was super-refreshing to walk outside each day and be able to see beyond 100 feet across the pod. And to see the sun and the clouds and the trees and the grass. something that those in the pod will go months without seeing. I talked with a guy who was in jail for 9 months, never seeing the sun in all that time.

Hebrews 13:3

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

Hebrews 10:34 tells us to "have compassion on those in prison." Nothing will create this compassion than living in their shoes for a few days.

My fourth point: My Weekend in Jail

4. Blessed me (Acts 20:35)

Now, to be sure, I came into the jail this weekend to be a blessing to those who are behind bars. And to be sure, I know that I was a blessing. Showing up was a blessing to these men, showing that we hadn't forgotten them. And I'm sure that the content of our program that we brought it was a blessing to them. lots of Bible was read, lots of Scripture was quoted. The gospel was clear. "That your sins, though they are many, God's mercy is more." We brought in a message of hope to these men. They live with little hope in this life.

One guy I spoke with is going to be sentenced in July. He pled guilty and has a 14-year minimum prison sentence awaiting him, he expects more. He has two girls. With tears in his eyes, he said, "When I get out, they will be all grown up." And we bring in the gospel to those in prison. That there is hope beyond this life. That there is eternal life to be had. Simply believe and trust in Jesus. He died on the cross for our sins. He raised from the dead to give us hope! We don't need to earn anything, but believe and trust in him! He will give you the grace needed to walk through these difficult days.

Yet, though we are a blessing to those in jail, I was blessed as well. This is because, God will bless you as you pour out your life for others. In Acts, chapter 20, Paul was in Miletus, speaking with the elder of the church in Ephesus. After talking about his ministry among them, Paul concludes with these words: Acts 20:35 In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" In other words, when you are in a position that you are able to give, and you actually give to help others in need, you are the one who will receive the greater blessing. Not financially. Not with the hope of financial blessing. But the deep, down joy, that God will give to you as you have been his hands to be a true help to others. I received more hugs from men this past weekend than I have received from you men at church this entire year. I was blessed to see the impact that you all have made upon the lives of these men.

One of the things that we asked you to do, was sign up for a half-hour prayer slot. to commit to pray for the weekend during that time, so that 24 hours a day, all weekend long, someone was committed to pray for the weekend. All of the names and times were placed upon a giant scroll of paper, that probably stretched a hundred feet. At one point during this weekend, we unrolled the scroll, to show to show the residents, that they are not forgotten, but they are being prayed for. One man said to me, "Seeing the prayer scroll brought me to tears. My family wouldn't pray for me. But these strangers are praying for me? It's all overwhelming."

That scroll was taped up to the top rail of the pod the entire weekend, for all to see. For all to be reminded that they are not forgotten. And seeing the wonder and the awe on the faces of these men at thinking of those on the outside praying for them was a blessing to me. And all weekend long, I saw the men looking up and reading the names of those who were praying for them, with wonder on their faces. And it was a blessing to me.

One of the things that we also invited you into this weekend was writing letters to the residents. Anonymous letters of blessing to those you have never met. I was greatly blessed to hand out these letters to the residents. As I handed them out my bags, I leaned over and said to the men, "I pray that these letters will encourage you greatly." I was greatly blessed to watch the residents read these letters. See, after handing them out, we on the outside, backed away, and sat on the side, and sang some soft songs and watched them read. I saw tears fill the eyes of several of the men who were reading these letters. Tears were running down their faces. I was especially keen to when some of the guys were reading the letters that I had written. I could see when they were reading my letters, because the paper was distinct. The blessing I received in being able to write these letters and watch them read them, far exceeded the labor it took to write them. I wish for those of you who contributed and wrote letters could have seen them being read. Better yet, you men can have that blessing, if you come on a weekend sometime.

When they were all done reading the letters, and we began mixing with the men again. There was a man at my table who was just sobbing, being overwhelmed at the kindness of so many to take the time write these letters. Another guy at my table said, "These letters are powerful! Small words make a big difference. God is good. People on the outside care for us." Another guy repeatedly told me, "Please, thank those who wrote the letter to us. It means so much." So, if you wrote a letter, or two or three, I extend their thankfulness to you all.

After the letters, someone read a nice story about walls that we build and keep others away. The story took about 15 minutes to read. After that story, at our table, we were asked to respond to the story and talk about it. The guy who had been sobbing over the letters said, "I still can't get over the letters."

I saw many tears this weekend. The tough criminals. Who are told that they need to stand firm and now show weakness. Yet, tears flowed this weekend. One man said, "Tears are a great cleansing of the soul." I'm blessed by their eagerness for the word. They are diligent in taking notes. They look forward to their Discipleship classes. They are open to learning whatever they can. I'm blessed by their eagerness to pray. When we have open prayer times, the difficulty isn't lengthy silence. the difficulty is in two people praying at the same time. Yes, we blessed the residents. But I was greatly blessed as well. Because, as Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

One of the biggest reasons why the weekend blessed me is that I spent time with Jesus this weekend.

This is my fifth point. My Weekend in Jail,

5. Was spent with Jesus (Matt 25:40)

Now, to be sure, Jesus wasn't physically with us during the weekend. These men are certainly not Jesus. They have committed crimes against society and are paying for it right now. But Jesus said, when you spend time with those in prison, you have spent time with me. I get this point from Matthew 25, when Jesus speaks of the coming judgment. He says this,

Matthew 25:31-46

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

This is one of those passages that are shocking. It's shocking to those who are standing before Jesus. Because they doesn't realize that when you help the hungry or thirsty or the stranger or the naked or the sick or the one in prison, you are helping Jesus. and when you neglect these things, you are neglecting Jesus. It's also shocking because on the basis of this, Jesus rewards some with heaven, Jesus condemns others to hell, to eternal punishment. Now, it's not that you will earn your way to heaven by such actions. Rather, it's that such actions are the fruit of a life that believe in Jesus. So, the question for all of you is this, "Are these things in your life?" "Are you caring for others?" One way to care for others (and the point of this message), is to visit those in jail. Let's move to my next point.

My weekend in jail,

6. Will trust God for fruit (Matt 16:18)

In one of his talks, Dave Thurman, one of the jail chaplains, shared that one of his biggest sorrows in life is to see so many of the men who are on fire for the Lord in the jail, turn away from him when they return outside. This is very much on the minds of those in the weekend. They realize the high that they are experiencing. They understand that it is so much better than drugs or alcohol. They understand the peace that comes through Christ, when walking in his ways. They don't need to fear the police or live in fear. They also realize that when they get out, and drugs are available. and old friends are around. and old habits kick in, that there is a danger that they will continue to follow after Jesus.

This weekend, many men talk about how easy it is to turn to God in difficult times, like their time in jail. They also say how easy is it to turn away when things are good, like when they are on the outside and have money and a place to stay. This is on the forefront of their minds. They understand this is their major issue. They understand how their difficulties in life have brought them here. Here are some testimonies that the men gave:

"It took 2 years of God taking everything away for me to come to him. I'm grateful that God is real."

"For 15 years I was at war with God. I blamed him for everything. This weekend, I saw, it wasn't God. It was me and my dark decisions. Not I know that God is there. He will forgive. This weekend is a miracle to me. I'm going to continue to be a soldier of God."

They have resolve! So, pray for them. Pray that they might continue in the faith.

I know that I will trust the Lord for any fruit that comes from my weekend in jail. Really, it's the chaplains in the jail that are laboring long and hard every week for these men. In our training, one of the chaplains, John Evans shared a devotional of the thing that has encouraged him. It comes from Jesus' words, . Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church." He said, "When you come to embrace the fact that Jesus will build his church, it will give you great comfort. We don't have to build the church, but Jesus will build his church. We aren't responsible for the growth of the church. Jesus will do that. We simply need to labor and share the word and trust God for the results."

I'm going to trust in the Lord for the fruit that he will produce from this weekend. My labor was small, focused mostly upon a handful of guys around my table. There were eleven other guys, who focused their attention upon the handful of guys at their tables. Gary, as he was leading

the weekend, spent far more time in prep for the weekend than I did.

The chaplains are laboring long and hard in love for these men. And really, it's those in jail who are doing the heavy lifting. One of the chaplains shared with me how it works in the jail. They hold discipleship training classes throughout the week. But the real ministry happens inside the pods, when the residents are living out their faith in the difficult environment. They are the ones leading other inmates to Christ. He said, "They don't come to our classes and get saved by what we teach them. They come to Christ in the pods, with the other inmates who share the gospel with them. We just come along and strengthen those who want it through the Scriptures." So, it's really these men who do the heavy lifting. Those in the picture may not be believers, but they are the ones that the believing residents are trying to reach. In it all, all we can do is trust the fruit to God.

Last night, we had an open-mic testimony time. One man came prepared with a testimony to give. After the testimony time, I asked him if I could have what he wrote to share with all of you. He said, "Sure." This is what he wrote:

This is my 2nd time attending the Spiritual weekend and both times have made me experience a high no drug can give, no bottle can give, and no thrill can give. It's a high only the Holy Spirit can give. I was the type of person who accepted God but only relied on him when times got tough. I lived life on my own terms with God as a backup. And what did that get me? A criminal record. An addictive personality. A divorce. Failed and tarnished relationships. Fines Fights, And endless amounts of stress. I was putting myself first instead of him above all. I know a few things are certain.

1. The man that walked in here Thursday is even stronger in his walk with God today.
2. My family has grown larger with my brothers in Christ.
3. I am no longer on death row.

There's a reason why there's a highway to hell and a stairway to heaven. We've gotta stop looking in the rear view mirror of our past and start looking through the windshield of our future. I don't know about you guys but I'm tired of driving. I'm pulling over and letting Jesus take the wheel. March 16, 2023 at 10:55pm, I was on my knees in tears praying and became born again. I felt the power of the Holy Spirit take the weight of guilt, shame, and stress I was bearing and I'll never forget it.

The real test starts when we leave the pod here and go back to the other pods. The noise and negative energy is gonna hit you like a ton of bricks and the devil is gonna start attacking you and you will face persecution from others. Stay strong my brothers and remember Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me."

We need to trust God with the fruit. I have one last point. My Weekend in Jail,

7. Will come again

Three months from now, another weekend will come around. I had several men ask me, "Are you coming next time?" I think I will. It was very rewarding for me to attend and be involved. I think I will go. I think I will come again.

Will some of you men join me (and Gary and Jake)?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on June 18, 2023 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.
