

Pumping Iron: Developing a Spirit of Steel

Sometimes, it takes time behind bars to get stronger. Bars at the gym, if we endure the challenge of intensity and heavy loads, increase our physical strength. Prison bars, should we ever find ourselves behind them because of our faith, increase our spiritual strength ... *if* we accept them humbly and conduct ourselves with dignity.

As we walk with God, we'll continuously encounter prison bars of all kinds, spiritual cells that appear around us, sometimes out of nowhere, and serve no purpose other than to hold us back from getting our dream job, meeting Mr. Right, losing those last ten pounds, finishing college ... fill in the blank. At least that's what we tell ourselves about these metaphorical prisons. It often takes us a while to learn that, ironically, their purpose is to set us free, to be the vessel that transports us from "glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Last week I wrote an article about how prisons today are devoid of gym equipment because lawmakers feared strong ex-convicts. This got me thinking: *When I'm in a spiritual prison, Satan wants me to think that all of my weights are gone, too. He wants me to feel helpless and weak and to believe that time behind bars is doing nothing but sapping my strength and crippling my defenses.*

These dry prison seasons are neither curses nor punishments. They're not karma getting back at us, and they're not God shaking His fist. That's not to say that we don't reap what we sow, but I do think that we often assume the stance of a Debbie Downer by believing there's never a bright side to suffering. We look for a cause to explain the miserable effect we're experiencing instead of looking for the Lord's wisdom at work. We tell ourselves to hunker down, keep to ourselves and

wait out our sentence instead of exploring the beauty within it.

I read in a devotional recently that during Joseph's time in Pharaoh's dungeon—for a crime he didn't commit, I might add—"iron entered his soul." The Bible says "the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison ... whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper."

God doesn't remove the strength-training equipment from your cell. When you feel like you're treading water at the bottom of a deep, abandoned well, He's there, ready to strengthen you with His love.

When you feel like you're stuck in a dungeon of disappointment and dashed dreams, He's beside you, ready to pour out His favor.

When you feel you've been emptied with nothing left to offer, He's within you, filling your cup with inner worth and prosperity.

Our time in prison is precious time to lean on Him, to trust and prove His faithfulness. It is from Him alone that we receive our strength, but as with strength-training tools at the gym, we must grab hold of them; we cannot lie down idly and expect our muscles to grow.

After about two years, depending on which Bible commentary you use, Joseph was freed from prison and promoted to the Pharaoh's right-hand man. Would he have been blessed and elevated to such a prominent position of influence had he not embraced the weights of God's "steadfast love" and "favor"? Neither can we take possession of the good and perfect plans God has for us if we insist on wallowing in our own weaknesses instead of delighting in His strengths.

This week I encourage you to, wherever you are in your

Christian walk, praise God for prison seasons, the ones behind you and the ones before you. Thank Him for ordaining them as spiritual gyms equipped to strengthen every aspect of your being and to usher you into future fields of abundance. Only then will iron enter our souls and steel settle into our spirits. {eoa}

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