

Shining A Light Through Prison Bars

Although many people have no sympathy for those on San Quentin's death row, Josie Smith prays that these condemned men will know the love of God.

When Josie was a college student back in 1949, she felt a specific call to become a missionary. Little did she know how God would choose to use her.

Her interest in prison ministry began years ago when she and her husband, Dan, operated a home for delinquent boys called Outreach for Youth. It wasn't long before parents and friends of incarcerated men began calling and writing, asking the Smiths to contact a friend or relative.

"For a short time, only my husband Dan went to the prison and jails," Josie explains, "and then I began to get an interest in the ministry due to being with the boys in our outreach home and seeing firsthand the circumstances that often led up to their incarceration as adults."

Then in June of 1981, as a result of a phone call about a man sentenced to death and in desperate need of a contact, Josie and Dan began visiting San Quentin's death row. "This is it!" she recalls thinking. God had revealed His mission field to her.

DESPERATE SOULS Quickly, friendships developed between Josie and many of the death-row inmates. She was easy to talk to and trustworthy. Word spread throughout the prison as more came—men who desperately needed someone to care about them and point them to the Savior.

"God has given my husband and me the ability to not let the crimes of these men weigh on us," she says, "but to see a

different side of them; to see them as Jesus does.” Many Christians ask Josie what compels her to do what she does, believing that these men deserve to die for the horrible crimes they have committed.

“My response,” says Josie, “is that the longer these men are alive, the more opportunity there is to lead them to the Lord. And they need salvation just as much as those men who will eventually be released from jail or prison. San Quentin death-row inmates, for the most part, will never be released.”

Although her ministry is sometimes lonely, Josie is thankful for the faithful people who have remained supportive through the years. “I saw a dramatic change in base support when we began to visit San Quentin,” she says. “I know that my mission is often misunderstood and that this ministry is certainly not for everyone.”

When Josie and Dan travel to the prison together, each meets with a different inmate. They receive approval from prison officials in advance for their visits. On the occasions when Josie makes the 100-plus-mile journey alone from her hometown of Fresno, California, she stays overnight in the area so that she can return the next day for a visit with a different inmate.

Josie says she is compelled to go. Every minute counts. The souls of men are at stake.

Amazingly, Josie feels no fear of the prison environment or of the inmates themselves. She says: “The men are actually very protective of me. The friendships that I have developed through the years remain deep and lasting.” Some of her memories have been deep and lasting, too.

THRESHOLD OF ETERNITY Feb. 22, 1996, remains permanently etched in Josie’s mind. There’s just something about watching a man die that has a way of changing a person forever.

Security was extremely tight when Josie and Dan arrived at the prison's main gate. After many official phone calls to verify their visit, they were transported by a prison vehicle to the proper area and ushered into the waiting room, where inmate Bill Bonin, his Bible in front of him, greeted them with a warm hug.

The rules of this visit were different. They were in the presence of three guards at all times. Tension in the small room eased due to Bill's calm presence and his amazing ability to give personal attention to his visitors.

On a prior visit Bill had told Josie about the day he asked the Lord to be his Savior. "It is hard to explain," he said, "but [the] Spirit came down and covered me, and I instantly felt that I had become a new person and that my life started all over again."

Josie continued, "Bill was so at peace that other inmates and the chaplain marveled at his calm. He seemed to know that he was going to a much better place." There would be no stay of execution for William Bonin, nor did he expect one. Josie recalled, "He said that it was all right, he was ready to die."

The prison guards arrived at 6:00 p.m. to tell Bill's friends that it was time to say a final goodbye. Josie kissed him on the cheek for the last time and told him she loved him. Bill replied, "There will be time for us in heaven."

Josie and Dan were among several others who would be allowed to witness William Bonin's execution. Included were a former San Quentin guard whose life had been touched because of Bill's influence and a writer who was working on a book about Bill.

As the group said their goodbyes, another guard stood in the corner with tears in his eyes, observing the emotional scene. Josie tried hard to keep her composure but tears slowly made

their way down her face, too.

As they walked out into the night chill, news helicopters circled overhead. Protesters on both sides of the death penalty debate held signs and banners. Emotions were tense.

As the evening wore on, it became increasingly difficult for Josie to remain quiet and still. "It's interesting how people react to stress," she said. "I paced, looked at drawings on the walls of the room, made small talk with the others; but mostly, I prayed.

"I prayed that God's Spirit would be close to Bill and that he would feel the presence of Jesus with Him." She also prayed for the families of Bill's victims.

After the guards served dinner, they searched the witnesses before ushering them to the death chamber. There, she recalled, "I told the sergeant that we did not take offense at his instructions, which included when and how we were to enter the chamber, metal detectors, and no personal contact with Bill.

"He was a very kind man, and I felt compassion toward him. This was also his first execution."

As the group entered the chamber, Bill looked relaxed and calm lying on a gurney, looking up at the ceiling. His hands and legs were strapped down.

He did not look at Josie or the others nor did he react when the lethal solution was administered, but Josie recalls, "As Bill looked up at the ceiling, closed his eyes and moved his lips, I was told that his cheeks filled with air and then he breathed out quietly."

Josie's heart pounded terrifically as she leaned hard on her husband's back. He reached out to hold her hand.

She prayed in earnest that Jesus would reach out to Bill with

outstretched hands and receive him into His kingdom. At 12:13 a.m. on the morning of Feb. 23, 1996, four minutes after the warden gave the order to begin the execution, Bill Bonin stepped through death's door.

Does God have a special place in His heart for prisoners? Josie's answer is a definitive Yes! "Dan and I want these men to know that in spite of the cells, the bars, the noise, they can still have peace.

"God loves them, and He died for [them]. We plant that seed, and God brings the results."

Because Josie Smith is where she is today, doing what God has asked her to do, many other death-row inmates can know that the Spirit of the Lord is great and mighty and that in the light of Christ's eternal love they are victorious and free.

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