



TAMEONTA

The Wilderness and the World: Lessons from Desert Monasticism

By Mark Walker

"And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed." (Mark 1:35 ESV)

"They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated - of whom the world was not worthy - wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." (Heb. 11:37b-38 ESV)

During my time in prison, it often occurred to me that prison life is, in some ways, quite similar to living in a monastery. Closed off from many of the world's distractions and temptations, as prisoners we follow Christ in unusual isolation from society. Prison is a unique form of the wilderness experience which is so common for God's people. In light of this parallel, I believe the Lord has something to teach us through His servants who, hundreds of years ago, chose the life of desert monks, withdrawing from society to follow Christ in the isolation of the wilderness.

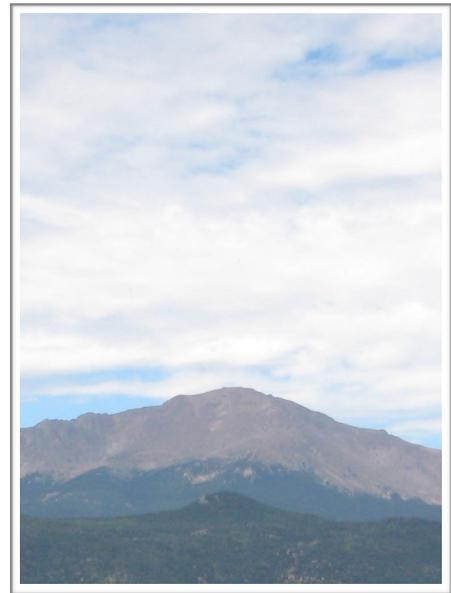


Photo taken by the author during a spiritual retreat.

Desert monasticism is one of the most intriguing, mysterious, and seemingly impenetrable movements in the history of the church. For western evangelicals, the idea of leaving society

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completely behind for a life of solitude in a desert cave is virtually incomprehensible. As a result, it is easy to dismiss or criticize these monks as self-centered extremists who misunderstood (or deliberately rejected) what we believe to be the biblical vision of the Christian life – the life of fellowship, witness, and love to which Christ has called us.

There is doubtless some validity to this criticism of the desert fathers and mothers. However, it is an incomplete, and therefore inaccurate, view of desert spirituality. A careful study of the circumstances

surrounding the origins of desert monasticism, and the teachings of the monks themselves, reveals a much more nuanced and complex vision of the Christian life than the casual observer might expect. Ultimately, though they withdrew in many ways from the world and the established church of their day, the desert monastics had a significant and lasting impact on both the church and the culture. There are lessons we can learn from them about how the seemingly isolated prison church can have the same sort of impact on the outside church and the world for Christ.

Origins of the Desert Movement

The beginnings of desert monasticism are usually traced to Antony, who was inspired to take up the life of poverty and solitude by a sermon on Matthew 19:21 in Egypt in 270 or 271 A.D. (Chryssavgis 2008, 141). At the time very few took notice of Antony's withdrawal into the Egyptian wilderness; by the time of his death, however, thousands of Christians had migrated into the desert to be taught by him and to live lives of isolation and asceticism following his example (Chryssavgis 2008, 141-142).

The vital feature of the desert which drew these men and women to its harsh environs was solitude – “the very word *monk* is derived from the Greek word *monachos*, which means ‘solitary’” (Gonzalez 2010, 161). Even in its communal forms, desert monasticism sought separation from the rest of the world in the isolation of the uninhabited wastes. This was particularly the goal of those who, like Antony, chose the life of the hermit:

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Society, with its noise and its many activities, was seen as a temptation and a distraction from the monastic goal. The term “anchorite,” which soon came to mean a solitary monk, originally meant withdrawn or even fugitive. For these people, the desert was attractive, not so much because of its hardship, but rather because of its inaccessibility. What they sought was not burning sands, but rather an oasis, a secluded valley, or an abandoned cemetery, where they would not be disturbed by others (Chryssavgis 2008, 141-142).

The Critique of Desert Monasticism

This withdrawal from the world into self-imposed isolation appears at first glance to be antithetical to the gospel message. “One of the first questions that arises when we read the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and consider these elders is the elitism of their experience. Is it, for example, selfish to withdraw into the desert when there appears to be so much suffering in the world? Are the Desert Fathers and Mothers anti-social figures of fourth-century Egypt?” (Chryssavgis 2008, 144).

Reading their sayings, it is at times difficult not to conclude that the monks were in fact anti-social. For example, the following is recorded in *The Sayings of the Fathers*: “Said the abbess Matrona: ‘Many people living secluded lives on the mountain have perished by living like people in the world. It is better to live in a crowd and want to live a solitary life than to live a solitary life but all the time

be longing for company” (Baillie, McNeill and Van Dusen 1958, 43). *The Conferences of Cassian* contain this striking saying of Abba John:

If there is anyone who delights in the desert loneliness and the separation from society; if there is anyone who can say with Jeremiah: “I have not desired the day of man, thou knowest”; I confess that with God’s help I was that man, or was on the way to being that man...The hermit aims at freeing his mind from all earthly thoughts, and to unite it with Christ so far as his human weakness allows: like the man of whom the prophet, Jeremiah, spoke: “Blessed is the man who hath borne the yoke from his youth. He shall sit solitary and hold his peace, because he hath taken it upon himself.” The Psalmist said: “I am become like a pelican in the desert. I watched and became like a sparrow alone upon the housetop” (Baillie, McNeill and Van Dusen 1958, 281, 284).

At other times, the monks appear to suggest that being in relationship with God and engaging other people are mutually exclusive options: “Abba Mark said to Abba Arsenius: ‘Why do you run away from us?’ The old man said: ‘God knows I love you. But I cannot be with God and with men. The countless hosts of angels have but a single will, while men have many wills. So I cannot let God go, and come and be with men’” (Baillie, McNeill and Van Dusen 1958, 182). As a result, it seems, those who would find peace in their relationship with God must forsake relationships with others. “One of the oldest brief summaries of the Desert rule is the answer of an old man questioned as to what manner of man a monk should be: ‘So far as in me is, alone to the alone (*solus ad solum*).’ ‘Except,’ said the abbot Allois, ‘a man shall say in his heart, I alone and God are in this world, he shall not find peace’” (Waddell 1960, 13).

"How can believers follow Jesus while sitting in a cave in the desert?"

Taken at face value these kinds of sayings are difficult to square with the teaching of our Lord. Did Christ not commission His disciples to go into the world and preach the message of His kingdom to all peoples (Matt. 28:19-20)? Did He not warn Christians not to hide their light from the world (Matt. 5:13-16)? Did He not call the church to be His witness to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)? Did He not command us to love others as He loved us (John 13:34-35)? How can believers follow Jesus while sitting in a cave in the desert? Did the desert fathers and mothers simply ignore these commandments? Or did they perhaps, in some way that is difficult for us to understand, believe themselves to be faithful to the call of Christ?

Desert Monasticism and Constantine

The rise of desert monasticism coincided with the rise to power of the Roman emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. The first three hundred years of the church had been characterized by persecution, of varying intensity, at the hands of the Roman government. During this period one of the greatest ways a believer could testify to the world of his or her faith in Christ was to suffer martyrdom, which many viewed as the supreme crown of the spiritual life. With the advent of Constantine and his favorable treatment of Christians, persecution dissipated, as did the hope of

martyrdom (Gonzalez 2010, 142). Suddenly the church and the civil government found themselves seeming allies rather than enemies, and the result was greater social status, wealth, and power for the church and greater influence of the government over church affairs (Gonzalez 2010, 142-143). Becoming a Christian now brought, not the threat of persecution and martyrdom, but rather respectability and the potential for social advancement. As a result, people began flooding into the church for reasons other than a passionate commitment to following Christ no matter the cost (Gonzalez 2010, 143).

There were many in the church who viewed these developments as a serious threat. "For them, the fact that the emperors now declared themselves Christian, and that for this reason people were flocking to the church, was not a blessing, but rather a significant loss" (Gonzalez 2010, 147). The temptations which accompanied the new alignment with power, wealth, and prestige were real and dangerous. Some of the faithful, believing the larger church to be moving in a destructive direction, withdrew to the deserts to become solitary monks (Gonzalez 2010, 147-148, 157-158).

What was the purpose of this withdrawal? It does not appear to have been, at least initially, a desire to flee from the presence of others. Rather, the desert monastics viewed their separation from the society of their time (into which the greater church was now becoming integrated) as necessary to maintain a faithful witness to Christ. During the former periods of persecution, the ideal of martyrdom was viewed as the ultimate witness to one's faith, because it was a public declaration of the surpassing worth of Jesus that would make one willing to sacrifice one's life rather than forsake Him (Chryssavgis 2008, 142). Now, with the cessation of persecution, this sort of sacrificial testimony to Christ was no longer possible. While many were coming to see Christianity as a path to worldly wealth, power, and prestige, the desert monks sought to preserve a testimony of willingness to forsake all and endure suffering in order to gain Christ. In this context, lives of asceticism and separation from the pleasures and temptations of society in the deserts of Egypt became, in a sense, a new form of martyrdom – a new means of testimony to Christ made necessary by new historical and social circumstances (Chryssavgis 2008, 142-143; Lane n.d., 299; Gonzalez 2010, 148, 157-158).

At the same time, the monks' separation acknowledged something the rest of the church seemed to have forgotten – their own vulnerability to the temptations which attend the favorable gaze of the world, and their consequent need for self-examination and holiness (Lane n.d., 299). While the greater church was coming to look more and more like the world around it, the desert monastics formed an alternative society, the very existence of which stood as an indictment of dominant social values and a witness to the true worth and cost of following Christ. "The desert Christians understood the church as an alien community no longer caught up in the anxious, self-interested preservation of the world-as-it-is. Their practice of indifference to the dominant social values of their age, exercised from the desert's edge, stood in stark contrast to the accommodating spirit of post-Constantinian, urban

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Christianity. Indeed, they understood their ‘oddness’ to be an essential part of their faithfulness to Christ and the new community being formed in their midst” (Lane 1994, 200; cf. Chryssavgis 2008, 143; Lane n.d., 298-299).

Blessed Are the Pure in Heart

One of the primary motives of the desert monks in distancing themselves from the world was to confront the corruption of their own hearts and discipline themselves for holiness. “The aim of asceticism was to wean monks from excessive attachment to the world, which drove them into the desert...Stripped of creature comforts and deprived of worldly distraction, they joined in what they considered the most important battle Christians have to face, the battle of the heart, penetrating innermost thoughts, not simply outward behavior” (Sittser 2009, 52). This movement of the desert

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Contrary to the view that the monks’ focus on personal holiness was an expression of self-centeredness, their own sayings on the subject make it clear that they had a greater goal in view: advancement of the kingdom of God. If God’s kingdom was to stand in contrast to the kingdoms of this world, His people had to display the peculiar characteristics of that kingdom which set it apart from the world. Thus, refusing to join the rest of the church in increasing conformity to the world, the desert monks cultivated the death to self – sacrificial purity of heart and life – that should be a distinctive quality of the disciple of Christ. This goal of the monastic life is clearly summed up by Abba Moses:

The ultimate goal of our way of life is, as I said, the kingdom of God, or kingdom of heaven. The immediate aim is purity of heart. For without purity of heart none can enter into that kingdom. We should fix our gaze on this target, and walk towards it in as straight a line as possible. If our thoughts wander away from it even a little, we should bring back our gaze towards it, and use it as a kind of test, which at once brings all our efforts back onto the one path...Then whatever can guide us towards purity of heart is to be followed with all our power: whatever draws us away from it is to be avoided as hurtful and worse. It is for this end—to keep our hearts continually pure—that we do and endure everything, that we spurn parents and home and position and wealth and comfort and every earthly pleasure. If we do not keep this mark continually before the eyes, all our travail will be futile waste that wins nothing, and will stir up in us a chaos of ideas instead of singlemindedness (Baillie, McNeill and Van Dusen 1958, 197-198).

Love One Another

One of the most difficult, and seemingly paradoxical, streams of teaching from the desert fathers and mothers is their insistence that their way of life promotes Christian love for others. There are striking statements of this monastic goal to be found in *The Sayings of the Fathers*. For example, Abba Antony said, “From our neighbor are life and death. If we do good to our neighbor, we do good to God: if we cause our neighbor to stumble, we sin against Christ” (Baillie, McNeill and Van Dusen 1958, 182; cf. Waddell 1960, 13). Similarly, Abba Poemen commented, “There is nothing greater in love than that a man should lay down his life for his neighbor. When a man hears a complaining word and struggles against himself, and does not himself begin to complain; when a man bears an injury with patience, and does not look for revenge; that is when a man lays down his life for his neighbor” (Baillie, McNeill and Van Dusen 1958, 183). And Abba Moses makes love the ultimate end of all the desert monastic’s labors: “To this end everything is to be done. Solitude, watches in the night, manual labour, nakedness, reading and the other disciplines—we know that their purpose is to free the heart from injury by bodily passions and to keep it free; they are to be the rungs of a ladder up which it may climb to perfect charity” (Baillie, McNeill and Van Dusen 1958, 183; cf. Sittser 2009, 64-65; Skedros 2011, 262-263).

However, it is precisely at this point that criticism of the desert lifestyle seems most legitimate – how can one love others and share the message of Christ’s love with them, and simultaneously seek to separate oneself from them (Chryssavgis 2008, 144-145)? The monks answer that it is only by detaching oneself from others through solitude that one can truly learn to love them. We cannot demonstrate Christ-like love to others unless we are first set free from the selfishness which seeks to use others for the satisfaction of our own desires, or to base our lives on others’ approval (John 5:41-44; Lane n.d., 304, 307, 309; cf. Kwon 2012, 150; Chryssavgis 2008, 147, 152). “Self-regard is a ravenous vice, consuming interactions with others, prayer, even God. The desert was a laboratory for training out of undue self-regard and into proper regard for God and others” (Byassee 2007, 67; cf. Farag 2012, 196).

This is the supreme strangeness of the life of the desert monks. From our vantage point it seems to be a life which excludes the possibility of love to others; from theirs, it was the only life that offered the possibility of genuine love for others. “As strange as it sounds, given the austere, threatening quality of the monks’ life in the wilderness, what the desert finally taught them was love. There in the wilds, they could be ignored enough, invited outside of themselves enough, to love and be loved for the first time in their lives. Loving God, loving other people, loving the created world in which they were placed” (Lane n.d., 312). To view the solitary life of the desert as a selfish life which turns away from others is to fail to understand the monks in their proper context. To these hermits, the purpose of their solitude, asceticism, and discipline was to fit them for the sacrificial love that Christ commands:

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The lives of Antony, Symeon, and Mary represent extreme examples of sacrificial love that in their own way put these saints' individual lives in proper balance with the world within and around them. Superficially, Antony's twenty-year seclusion in a deserted fortress, Symeon's voyeuristic life on top of a pillar, and Mary's self-imposed exile to the desert for her past sins appear to be self-centered and to express each saint's own self-absorption. Outside of the context of sacrificial love, such a reading of these saints' lives fails to see the deeper reality of the cross and its transformational power (Skedros 2011, 266).

Voices from the Wilderness

If we view the desert monastics as simply self-centered individuals who turned their backs on their society and ran to the wilderness, we would expect them to have very little impact on the society they had left behind. But here we are faced with another conundrum, for the reality is quite different:

These various expressions of agape did not stay confined to the desert. Surprisingly, the desert fathers and mothers exercised considerable influence over the wider population, which proves, once again, that physical isolation did not always lead to ostracism or irrelevance. People became fascinated by these strange men and women who left behind everything to seek God in the wilderness. Some joined the movement, so many in fact that contemporary observers commented that the desert became as populated as the city. Others demanded that the most famous desert fathers serve as leaders of the church, which is how Athanasius and Chrysostom were drafted into service. Still others sought their advice, believing that, as detached as they were from the world, they would serve as trustworthy advisers. Thus even the great Simeon the Stylite, who lived atop a Roman pillar for some thirty years, became counselor and mentor to the wealthy and powerful. From time to time the desert fathers and mothers even traveled to cities to serve the needy, protest injustice, battle heretics, and witness against the compromised state of the church. Remaining on the margins of society, they nevertheless challenged, comforted, and served the mainstream (Sittser 2009, 65).

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Written accounts of the monks' lives and collections of their sayings have inspired Christians to this day. "Paradoxical as it seems, their denial of the life of earth has been the incalculable enriching of it, and they have affected the consciousness of generations to which they are not even a name" (Waddell 1960, 24).

From their wilderness isolation, the voices of the desert fathers and mothers came to the church and the culture of their day with power and influence. In addition to those who actually became leaders in the church and those who taught and counseled the people who sought their wisdom, there were desert theologians whose writings significantly impacted the theology of the church (Sittser 2009, 53).

Written accounts of the monks' lives and collections of their sayings have inspired Christians to this day. "Paradoxical as it seems, their denial of the life of earth has been the incalculable enriching of it, and they have affected the consciousness of generations to which they are not even a name" (Waddell 1960, 24).

It is tempting to think that these hermits created such a widespread impact largely in spite of themselves. There is evidence, however, that the monks were aware of, and intentional about, the impact their solitary spirituality should have on the church and culture (Lane 1994, 200). One of the most obvious indications of this awareness is the fact that many of the desert fathers and mothers allowed others to write down their teaching:

Similarly, the desert fathers sought to escape the world's common forms of social recognition and esteem. Yet they allowed their sayings and deeds to be recorded and were acquainted enough with visitors who had heard of their fame to know that these Sayings would be read far and wide. How does one submit to ever more austere forms of self-abnegation and also tell others about one's holiness so as to invite imitators? Even the solitude-seeking hermits read the Scriptures that call for community and insist on God's mandate to encourage others to holiness (Byassee 2007, 65).

In light of the realization that the desert monastics desired to function as models to others of the life of Christian discipleship, we must reconsider the possibility that these men and women (although their approach and perspective seem bizarre and foreign to us) were in fact attempting to live out, in their own way, Jesus' call to make disciples in the world.

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Desert Spirituality and the Prison Church

"This kind of behavior is so alien to the modern quest for success, prosperity, and comfort that we as Christians living in the West hardly know how to respond to the movement, except of course to ignore it or to dismiss it as too odd to be taken seriously. It is simply too easy to stumble over the excesses of the movement and thus excuse ourselves from sifting the wheat from the chaff and learn what we can from it" (Sittser 2009, 50-51). Yet, it is precisely because of this strange perspective that imprisoned disciples of Jesus can learn a great deal from the desert monks.

First, desert spirituality teaches us that prison - a place outside the noise, distraction, and busyness of our culture - provides an ideal context for self-examination, disciplined pursuit of holiness, and building our relationship with God. In silence and solitude, when we stand apart from the world, we can "begin to see our sins, root them from our spirits, and leave space for holiness to bloom" (Byassee 2007, 24). In the desert we learn to grow in genuine intimacy with Christ through quiet, through prayer, through meditation and reflection (Chryssavgis 2008, 147). This is a vital facet of the Christian spiritual life, and an area in which the western evangelical church has often been woefully deficient. The prison church can teach the wider church much if we learn this lesson well. If we desire to have a full experience of the life of discipleship and to be effective witnesses for Christ, we would be wise to consider the example of the desert fathers and mothers at this point:

It may be that we are in fact called to be more selfish in the spiritual life. This may sound strange, but perhaps we ought to set aside a time and a place where

we do nothing else at all but address the passions of the soul and meditate on God. It may be that we should take time out for ourselves and for God in the same way as we do—quite naturally, and without ever considering that this is in any way selfish—to eat and rest and be entertained. The truth is that we are no good to others or to ourselves if we avoid or miss this stage of the desert (Chryssavgis 2008, 145).

Second, desert spirituality reminds us that true witness to Christ involves sacrificially demonstrating with our entire lives that He is worth forsaking the world and everything it has to offer (Matt. 13:44-46). Though we need not depart into a physical wilderness, we are called to visibly turn our backs on this world and its temptations and treasures, and set our faces toward the Lord and His kingdom (Lane 1994, 196). In our culture of conformity, where the broader church (much as in the fourth century) has been so aligned with the surrounding society that it has been difficult at times to

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tell the difference, this radical, counter-cultural departure from the worldly consensus is a startling and compelling witness to the vastly different values of the alternative society of God's kingdom (Lane 1994, 194, 197). In its imposed isolation from society, God has given the prison church a unique opportunity to provide such a witness. How can the world explain a community of disciples living lives of joy, fulfillment, passion, contentment, service, and love in the midst of a prison wilderness, without the approval or comforts of society? How attractive might such a community be?

Finally, the desert fathers and mothers teach us that Christ-like love is a love that flows from fullness rather than need, and that we must cultivate our own love for God and deep awareness of own weaknesses if we are to have genuine love and compassion for others (Chryssavgis 2008, 152). The predisposition of our church today is to move immediately toward the "doing" of love without taking the time to cultivate our personal capacity for love:

We must never use love and service as excuses to avoid the inner work of transformation. All of us—and especially those in the caring professions—should take time out for ourselves in retreat, for our friends in relaxation, and for God in prayer. The Desert Fathers and Mothers teach us that love is not an outpouring of the self that resembles the water that is poured into sand or else into a bucket with holes. Prayer, even the most intense form of solitary meditation, is deeply connected to our ability to relate to others (Chryssavgis 2008, 146).

Even the desert monks recognized that it is not necessary to retreat to a literal desert in order to practice these desert disciplines. "The *Sayings* contain several stories indicating that the desert is not the only place, nor even the best place, to train oneself in the faith...God can use virtually any setting to do his deeper work in us. The true test of discipleship involves how believers live for God right where we are" (Sittser 2009, 61). However, when we find ourselves in the prison desert, we

should take these strange hermits seriously enough to ask what they may have to teach us. It is easy for us to point to the monks' spiritual blind spots; perhaps, across the sands and the ages, they are also pointing to ours. What would happen in the prison churches - to our fellowship with God, our witness for Christ, our love for one another, and our impact on the world - if we began, even in small measure, to live and model the spiritual life of the desert?

Were Christians to practice this stubborn desert discipline today, they would find a freedom that is refreshing and contagious to some, but also threatening and intolerable to others. Unjust societal structures and people addicted to power will not tolerate being ignored. They are profoundly threatened by those not subject to their influence, no longer playing by the accepted rules. To cease to be driven by the fear of what other people think is to become a threat to the world as we know it. Only at great personal risk does one become indifferent to the accepted standards and expectations of the dominant culture. Yet the people willing to assume this risk — the ones who find the center of their existence outside the cultural milieu — are those who model for us today the vitality of Christian faith (Lane 1994, 202; cf. Byassee 2007, 17).

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Ministry Updates

- **What does "Tameonta" mean?** We get this question so frequently that we have decided to include the answer in every issue from now on! The name is a transliteration of a Greek phrase found in 1 Cor. 1:28 which means "things that are not." Read 1 Cor. 1:26-31 for a better understanding of why we selected this name for our newsletter.

A Parolee's Testimony

by Maurice Carter

The Lord has truly been good to me. Since being out, I have had my share of victories as well as challenges. I guess that is what's expected in this world. One main thing that is most apparent: God is still faithful.

My friend, the journey still continues even out here. I have seen a lost world of men and women who are tired of being sick and tired. Many are hungry for something far more satisfying than what they've been craving and feasting on for years. You and I both know that something is Christ Jesus. I have starved and been in deep thirst until Jesus found me, and gave me drink and bread that has satisfied the longing in my soul.

I've had my share of failures and struggles, but I know to be true that God's grace is sufficient still. My first couple of weeks out I had two jobs where God gave me great favor with both employees and employers. After many days walking in the cold winter and hot summer, the Lord blessed me with a vehicle that runs well. On top of that blessing, He allowed me to be hired full time on a job that I once worked through a temp agency. I'm also receiving benefits and greater pay on this job. After praying and believing I have finally found my church home, where I am the lead worshipper.

God has truly been good, not because I'm good or have done everything right, but God loves me and continues to show that love to me and others around me. My friend, continue to pray, continue to fight and believe, and God will bring it to pass in your life. Don't lose heart or become weary in well-doing. For in due season you will reap if you will not faint. God loves you, and so do I. Your brother in the faith, Maurice Carter. **"He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler." Ps. 91:4**

•**Connecting Prison Churches to God's Global**

Mission: God has burdened our hearts at The Cell Church to find new ways to connect our brothers and sisters in prison to God's global mission to spread the gospel of Christ and expand His kingdom among every tribe, tongue, people, and nation on earth. One of the ways we will try to do this is by sharing updates and prayer requests from missionaries who have come into contact with our ministry. You will find the first of these enclosed with this newsletter. Brad and Kathy Koenig are missionaries to the Esimbi tribe in Cameroon. Brad is a linguist who has helped to develop a written language for the Esimbi, who previously had no written language. He and his wife are now assisting in the translation of the Scriptures into Esimbi, and teaching the Esimbi people to read and write their own language for the first time. Please take some time to pray for the Koenigs and their ministry, and for a powerful movement of God's Spirit among the Esimbi!

•**Contacts in the Women's Prisons:**

After a long season of prayer, we are grateful to the Lord for providing us with a number of godly women who desire to mentor female prisoners. One of these volunteers offered to help us pursue some leads to establish contact with sisters at Denver Women's Correctional Facility. By God's grace we were recently able to contact two sisters who are ministering in the body there, and who are excited about the opportunity to connect with The Cell Church! Please pray that the Lord will continue to hold this door open for us, and bring us more faithful sisters from churches in the community with a heart to minister to His imprisoned daughters.

•**Q in Mongolia:** One of our ministry directors, Q, has recently returned to Mongolia with his father to spend some time with his Mongolian former

cell mate. He will also be looking for ministry opportunities while he is there, and we will be sharing an update on his trip once he returns. Please remember him and his father in your prayers as they travel, as well as the whole church of Christ in Mongolia!

- **Mark Speaks at AVCF Volunteer Appreciation Banquet:** I (Mark Walker) am very grateful to God and to the administration at AVCF for allowing me to travel to the facility in April to encourage volunteers and the brethren at their volunteer appreciation banquet. I shared from a prisoner's perspective the long-term impact the ministries of volunteers have had on my life, and told them that their faithfulness will bear far more fruit than they will probably ever see. I also had the opportunity to meet a number of the brothers in person who I have been writing to for years. It was a great blessing and inspiration to me, and I pray I will be able to do that sort of thing again in the future!

Letters from the Church

"As I completed my first exegetical paper for the TUMI class, I marveled and took great joy in how wonderful an experience it is to be granted access into the mind of Yahweh. The exegesis of Is. 55:8-11 is the most in-depth study I have done to date. I feel so undeserving and unworthy of the glimpse the Father has given me of Himself. At the same time I get just how much of an honor and privilege it is to be given His revelation. This glimpse of how He thinks and moves has brought about a change. I must see all things in a different light, interpret Scripture differently, act and react to everything differently. Everything in my life will be forever different! This change in my heart and mind is indeed a great act of His grace in my life. Praise be to Yahweh! - *Richard, Buena Vista Correctional Facility*

"Let me list say this right out of the gate - TUMI has ended up being SO MUCH MORE than I originally expected. The textbooks, in my opinion, are great... The workbook and appendices are awesome, and already Don Davis has blown my mind and enhanced my own perspective many times during the lectures. I guess what I'm trying to say in all is that I've been very impressed with the quality of the materials so far. Even more by the fact that TUMI requires critical summaries of all our readings, quizzes, memory verses, and the exegetical and ministry projects. I can't even begin to tell you how much it has blessed my heart to see a room of 12 men - brothers from my church - that I know, love, and respect, and want the best for, being exposed to this level of material and study together! Our discussions have been lively, engaging, and inspiring, and each week for half an hour after class we take the time to get to know one brother at a time more intimately. The cohesiveness and accountability build with each class." - *Monir, Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility*

"Things here are great. I get so excited about the things that God is doing. The movement of the Holy Spirit is fluid and ever growing here at this facility and in these men. He lights paths and opens and closes doors. Each new step is growing us, teaching us, and preparing us. He's really doing a work here." - *Nathan, Sterling Correctional Facility*