

# TAMEONTA

*God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:28-29 ESV)*



## They Were All Afraid of Him: Former Prisoners and the Local Church

*By Mark Walker*

*And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he*

*had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. (Acts 9:26-31 ESV)*

**W**hen you think about trying to join a church on the streets someday, what do you imagine? We know that some of our imprisoned brothers and sisters will spend the rest of their lives in ministry to the churches on the inside, and The Cell Church is honored to labor alongside each of you in that rich and fruitful field as long as the Lord permits us. But we also know that the vast majority of you will one day be released and resume lives in the community. For committed followers of Christ, this will involve finding and joining a local gathering of faithful disciples. What will that experience be like? Will you be welcomed with love and acceptance, or

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treated with fear and suspicion? Will you have opportunities to use your gifts and training in service to the body, or be relegated to the sidelines? Will you be received at all?

As former prisoners seeking to participate fully in today's local churches, we are not the first to confront this difficulty. God has graciously given us a model in Scripture of a faithful, gifted believer whose past sins haunted him when he tried to join a local church: the Apostle Paul. Acts 9:26-31 reveals three key stages of Paul's relationship with the church in Jerusalem. First, Luke acknowledges the reasons why the church was reluctant to accept Paul into its fellowship. Second, he tells us how that reluctance was overcome. Finally, the consequences of the church's decision to accept Paul rather than reject him play out. Thus, Paul's experience not only offers a pattern which former prisoners can apply when approaching local churches, but also presents a method by which churches can evaluate former prisoners as prospective members and leaders.

**“God has graciously given us a model in Scripture of a faithful, gifted believer whose past sins haunted him when he tried to join a local church: the Apostle Paul.”**

Part of Luke's purpose in including this narrative in Acts was to demonstrate Paul's legitimacy as both a genuine disciple of Christ and an apostle commissioned by Jesus to proclaim the gospel message (Gill 1974, 548). To this end, Luke needed to show that Paul was accepted as such by both established believers like Ananias (Acts 9:10-25) and the apostles in Jerusalem. Paul's own description of his first visit to Jerusalem in Gal. 1:15-24 reveals that there was a delay of several years between his conversion and his first meeting with the apostles. Luke introduces his narrative by saying only that these things took place “when [Paul] had come to Jerusalem,” with no indication of how much time had passed (Acts 9:26). It appears possible that none of the churches in Judea had heard of Paul's conversion and ministry in Damascus prior to his visit to the Jerusalem church (Gal. 1:18-24).

If there was such a passage of time between Paul's encounter with Ananias after his conversion and his visit to the church in Jerusalem, why did Luke place the two narratives one after the other in Acts? I suspect it is because he intended us to recognize a pattern that is repeated in both narratives. First, Ananias, like the church in Jerusalem, is suspicious due to Paul's previous behavior and hesitates to believe that he is truly a disciple (Acts 9:10-14, 26). Reassurance of the reality of Paul's conversion is given to both (Acts 9:15-16, 27), and consequently Paul is permitted to join the respective communities of faith in Damascus and Jerusalem (Acts 9:17-19, 28). Thereupon Paul immediately begins to boldly preach the gospel of Jesus (Acts 9:20-22, 28-29), and the Jewish religious authorities respond by attempting to kill him (Acts 9:23-24, 29). But Paul escapes with the help of the churches (Acts 9:25, 30; cf. Gill 1974, 547-48). Taken together these two narratives not only emphasize the sudden, surprising conversion of Paul; they also

demonstrate the genuineness of his faith and apostolic call by highlighting Paul's bold preaching of the gospel in the face of serious persecution (Gill 1974, 548). Luke intended these two narratives to provide his readers with persuasive evidence of the legitimacy of Paul's conversion and ministry (Gill 1974, 546).

**“They all feared admitting Paul to their communities lest he do similar harm to the believers in their churches. Based on the available evidence this was not an unreasonable fear.”**

Acts records that when Paul had come to Jerusalem he was attempting (ἐπειράζεν) to be joined to (κολλᾶσθαι) the disciples there (9:26). The reluctance of the church in Jerusalem to receive the newly converted Paul into their fellowship was based on what they had seen or heard of his previous behavior in persecuting, arresting, and even murdering Jesus' disciples (cf. Acts 7:59 – 8:1; 9:13, 14). They all feared admitting Paul to their communities lest he do similar harm to the believers in their churches. Based on the available evidence this was not an unreasonable fear. However, it is important to note that this fear was rooted in skepticism about the

genuineness of Paul's conversion – the church did not believe that he had really become a disciple of Christ (μὴ πιστεύοντες ὅτι ἐστὶν μαθητής; Acts 9:26). “Even believers who have seen the power of God at work in their own lives can doubt God's ability to change others” (Peterson 2009, 316).

What was it that finally overcame this fear and reluctance, and convinced the church in Jerusalem that Paul was a genuine believer? Ultimately, he was accepted because a prominent and respected member of the church was willing to advocate for him by testifying to his radically changed behavior before the leadership (Acts 9:27). Barnabas, so named for his character as an encourager (Acts 4:36), was persuaded of the reality of Paul's conversion and worked to secure his acceptance. “[I]t is wholly in character with what we learn of *Barnabas* from Acts that it should have been he who was prepared to welcome a person whom the rest of the church might have been slow to forgive for his previous attacks on them and whom they still regarded with uncertainty and fear” (Marshall 1980, 185).

First, Barnabas took Paul and led (ἡγάγεον) him to the apostles, personally accompanying him and presenting him to the church leadership. Then Barnabas spoke to the apostles as an advocate on Paul's behalf, recounting the evidence that had convinced him that Paul was no longer a danger to the church. “And Barnabas' prestige with the apostles and other believers in Jerusalem was such that when he gave them his guarantee that Saul was now a true disciple of Jesus, they were reassured” (Bruce 1988, 193; cf. Peterson 2009, 316).

In particular, Barnabas gave a detailed account of Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus on the road while emphasizing the subsequent transformation of his behavior: Paul

immediately began to preach the good news about Jesus in Damascus in spite of the resulting persecution (Gill 1974, 548; cf. Acts 9:16). The apostles accepted Paul into the church on the basis of Barnabas' testimony, and he was thereafter permitted to move freely among the believers at Jerusalem (Acts 9:28). Luke's account contains no suggestion that the church, once it had been persuaded of the reality of Paul's faith in Jesus, continued to exclude him in any way for fear that he would lapse into his prior life of persecution. Rather, he was permitted to come and go without restriction and to engage in the crucial ministry to which God had appointed him (Acts 9:28).

The result (μὲν οὖν) for the Jerusalem church was entirely positive (Acts 9:31). Paul immediately began boldly preaching the gospel in the city, and debated so effectively with the Hellenists that they sought to destroy him (Acts 9:29). Once again, Paul faced severe persecution for the name of Christ and was compelled to flee (Acts 9:30; cf. 9:16). Having received Paul as a brother, the disciples not only tolerated his ministry but risked their own safety to support and protect him (Bock 2007, 371). Paul's conversion not only brought believers widespread peace and relief from persecution, it also resulted in the edification and growth of the church (Acts 9:31).

The affirmation and support of Paul and his ministry by the Jerusalem apostles was a turning point in the entire history of Christianity. Not only did Paul prove to be a genuine disciple of Christ, but God worked through him to write the majority of the New Testament and to lay the foundation for the expansion of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire in the first century (Bruce 1988, 196-97; Stott 1990, 178). The significance of the church's decision to accept Paul, rather than fear and reject him, cannot be overstated. What a difference Barnabas made through his willingness to associate with, and advocate for, a man the rest of the church shunned!

**“The significance of the church’s decision to accept Paul, rather than fear and reject him, cannot be overstated.”**

Luke's narrative contains powerful lessons for both former prisoners and local church leaders. For those of us who are, or one day will be, preparing to be released and looking for a church home, Paul's example shows us a very effective way to approach the church leadership. If you can develop a relationship with one "Barnabas" – one well-known and well-respected church member with a heart for you and your situation – it will give that individual an opportunity to personally get to know your character and hear your testimony. Then, if that person is willing to present you to the church leadership and testify on your behalf, the leaders will have evidence from a trusted and valued source that you will be a blessing and an asset to the church rather than a threat. It is far easier to build a relationship with one person than it is to persuade an entire group of elders or pastors, who know nothing about you, that they should welcome you into their congregation. Remember that as a prisoner returning to the community you are

essentially an unknown quantity – aside from your criminal record, that is! Having a “Barnabas” will give one representative of the church a chance to discover who you truly are, and to observe the strength of your walk with the Lord and your exercise of spiritual gifts in ministry, before asking the leadership to make a decision about you.

For local church leaders, the story of Paul’s acceptance by the Jerusalem church should encourage you to identify and equip potential Barnabases in your own congregations. “There is an urgent need for modern Ananiases and Barnabases who overcome their scruples and hesitations, and take the initiative to befriend newcomers” (Stott 1990, 178). You may already be aware of one or more believers in your church who seem to have that particular combination of gifts and personality which leads them to engage visitors and to befriend those on the margins of the congregation.

**“Will your church choose to invest the time, effort, and risk necessary in order to welcome released prisoners and provide them opportunities for ministry?”**

These members have the potential for a very unique ministry engaging former prisoners on behalf of the church. It is an excellent way of honoring your responsibility to protect the flock from potential danger while still remaining open and welcoming to men and women who are, sadly, all too often despised and rejected by both society and the church.

This section of Acts should also admonish pastors and elders regarding the incredible ministry potential that former prisoners possess. Imagine the devastating loss to the entire church if the Jerusalem elders had remained too afraid of Paul to permit him to live and minister freely among them! Will your

church choose to invest the time, effort, and risk necessary in order to welcome released prisoners and provide them opportunities for ministry?

In his book *Risk Is Right: Better to Lose Your Life Than to Waste It*, John Piper passionately attempts to debunk a myth which often keeps the church paralyzed in her service to Christ:

One of my aims is to explode the myth of safety and to somehow deliver you from the enchantment of security. Because it’s a mirage. It doesn’t exist. Every direction you turn, there are unknowns and things beyond your control ... There is sometimes a subtle selfishness behind our avoidance of risk taking. There is a hypocrisy that lets us take risks every day for *ourselves* but paralyzes us from taking risks for *others* on the Calvary road of love. We are deluded and think that such risk may jeopardize a security that does not in fact even exist ... It is costly to follow Christ. There is risk everywhere. But this very risk is the means by which the value of Christ shines more brightly ... And now what about you? Are you caught in the

enchantment of security, paralyzed from taking any risks for the cause of God? Or have you been freed by the power of the Holy Spirit from the mirage of Egyptian safety and comfort? Do you men ever say with Joab, “For the sake of the name, I’ll try it! And may the Lord do what seems good to him”? Do you women ever say with Esther, “For the sake of Christ, I’ll try it! And if I perish, I perish”? ... On the far side of every risk – even if it results in death – the love of God triumphs. This is the faith that frees us to risk for the cause of God (Piper 2013, 19-23, 34-38, 47).

When you walk out of prison and into the church down the street for the first time, you risk. When you offer to serve in ministry even though everyone knows you have a criminal record, you risk. When your church, school, or organization receives former prisoners in love rather than turning them away in fear, you risk. When you step forward in your church as Barnabas did, when you put your own safety and reputation on the line to build relationships with released prisoners and vouch for the genuineness of their personal transformation and commitment to the ministry of the gospel, you risk. When the Jerusalem church took that risk with Paul, “the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied” (Acts 9:31 ESV). Is the risk worth it? That is a question each one of us – former prisoner, church leader, or “Barnabas” – must answer for ourselves.

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## **So That We Might Have Hope**

*By Tim Callis (FMCC)*

*For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. (Romans 15:4 NIV)*

**A** woman is living in a small town in the middle of nowhere during biblical times. She has to make ends meet and provide for her family, so she starts a restaurant and serves drinks. Upstairs she rents rooms. Since the food isn’t all that great, and men tend to drink more than eat, “other things” happen in the rooms she rents out upstairs.

She soon finds out that she has to make more money to provide for her family. The food and booze just isn't making enough money. She starts selling her body to the half-drunk men. She wakes up day after day, washing dishes and clothes, and doing the mundane tasks of a typical woman in her day. She often wonders if this is all there is to life. She wonders, "Will there ever be more? Will this soiled, used-up body die in this nowhere town and be thrown out like the trash? Will I be remembered? Will my children care when I am gone? Have I accomplished anything that will truly affect my family? My city? My country? The kingdom?"

Running a "bar" in a small town, you hear all of the rumors about everyone and everything. You hear about everyone's children, pets, and spouses. You are also the first to hear the news about other cities and other nations. Recently, she heard some disturbing rumors about a large group of people that came from Egypt heading toward their town. Supposedly, they worshipped a God that did some amazing things. The rumors said that this God of theirs split open the Red Sea about 40 years ago, and after they walked through on dry land the water came back together and drowned the Egyptian army. For the past 40 years this God supposedly gave them water and food in the desert. Now they were headed this way, and everyone was in an uproar. Every army that opposed them was somehow defeated. "Miracles?" she thought to herself. "I sure could use one."

One day, a couple of strangers came into the bar, speaking with a weird accent and

dressed like they came from a foreign country. The more they talked the more she believed they were from this band of foreigners that everyone was talking about. The woman (Rahab was her name) decided that the only way for her and her family to have any chance for a change and to escape destruction from this invading band of marauders (they were called Hebrews) was to make a deal with them. She knew she had to do it soon too, because in this town (Jericho) rumors spread fast.

It didn't take long to tell them all they wanted to know, in exchange for deliverance for her and all of her family. There were only two conditions: a red rope had to hang out of her window, and the only persons that would be safe were the ones inside the bar. Sure enough, in a couple of hours the sound of pounding footsteps came running up the stairs. She had already hidden the men on the roof. They believed the story that the men had already left the city. The city's army thought they were in hot pursuit as they ran out of the city gate. Little did she know, but about a week later her whole life would change. The marauders' army came in waves, the walls of the city fell down, and Rahab and her family were rescued.

*Hope*

As her life unfolds, “Rahab the prostitute” gets married to a man named Salmon and they have a son, Boaz. Boaz marries a lady named Ruth and they have a son and name him Obed. Obed has a son named Jesse. Jesse has eight sons, and the eighth is named David. David becomes the greatest king that Israel ever had, and was called a “man after God’s own heart.” (The foregoing was paraphrased from Joshua 2-6 and Matthew 1:56).

I am writing this as I turn 60 years old while I am locked up in prison. That would not be remarkable, except for the fact that I have been in prison since I was 19 years old. Forty-one years is a long time no matter which way you look at it. Many times during that period, this time of year has not been one of celebration, but a marker of how long I have been here. In fact, the clouds of depression have invaded my life on many occasions.



I would like to encourage anyone reading this with a couple of things. First of all, God knows you, knows where you are at, and He knows what you are going through. Life can be VERY hard at times. It may seem as if nothing you are doing has any worth, and all you are doing is washing dishes or cleaning toilets. In Paul’s sermon to the Athenians (Acts 17), he said that God “gives everyone life and breath and everything else,” and then adds that God marks out our “appointed times” and the “boundaries” of our lands. In other words, God is keeping us alive, supplying our every need, and He has us right where He wants us. We do not know what God has planned for us, but we can know that it is good (Romans 8:28). Continue doing what you are doing, and know that God is there with you (Matthew 28:20).

The second thing I would like to say is, “Do not be afraid” to step out in faith. Rahab was not afraid to talk to these strangers, because God presented her with an opportunity. In fact, Hebrews 13:2 says that one of those “strangers” could be an angel. God is the one who opens doors that no man can shut, and closes doors that no man can open (Revelation 3:7). These doors can be for business, ministry, relationships, or something entirely different. Whatever the case, know that God is in charge and keep looking to Him for answers.

The last thing I would like to say is, never lose hope. I am not talking about hoping in fairy tales or our own vain imaginations. Trust me, I have believed in a lot of things that were not of God. I also know that “the Spirit of God” searches out the deep things of God and

then teaches them to us in ways that we can understand. These are things that no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind on earth has ever even thought of (see 1 Corinthians 2:9-13). Hebrews 11:1 says that our faith is built on the confidence that what we hope for is going to come to pass, because we know the God who promised it (assurance). You cannot have faith without hope. And you cannot have hope without a promise from God. Grab onto God's promise for you and do not let go.

To be perfectly honest, I am not only writing this for you, whoever you are. I am writing this for me. I need to be reminded of this each and every day -

especially as I come up for parole in October for the eighth time. I have to remind myself that God knows me inside and out, not to be afraid to step out in faith, and to rely on the promises God has given to me. I pray that you experience a fresh encounter with God today, that encounter transforms your life even more into the image of Jesus, and you know Him even more intimately.

*Tim Callis is a Colorado prisoner currently incarcerated at Four Mile Correctional Center in Cañon City. He writes his own blog, "Flaming Arrows," which can be read at [www.flamingarrows457.com](http://www.flamingarrows457.com).*

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## MINISTRY UPDATES

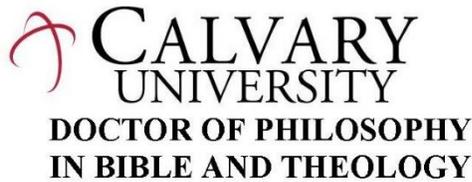
### Expanding TUMI to Additional Facilities

By God's grace, The Cell Church currently has a number of exciting opportunities to expand our TUMI site into additional facilities! First, we are nearly ready to launch a new TUMI class at Crowley County Correctional Facility, which will begin with twenty students, and another seventy-five or so on the waiting list. Please thank God with us for this amazing opportunity, and ask Him to open every door and provide every resource needed to make this new class a success, for the sake of His call on the students' lives and the expansion of His kingdom in the facility!

Second, earlier this month representatives from The Cell Church and Denver TUMI met with a group of pastors in Sterling to discuss the possibility of starting a class at the prison there. Third, we are training a prisoner at Limon Correctional Facility as an approved TUMI mentor. Although Limon is already blessed with extensive biblical and theological training opportunities, this man could potentially serve as a mentor in the future, either at Limon itself or at some other facility to which he may be transferred. Finally, we are in contact with a prisoner at La Vista Correctional Facility, a women's prison in Pueblo, preparing to begin discussing the possibility of a TUMI class there. We are extremely excited about the potential to begin training women in prison with the Capstone Curriculum! Please ask the Lord to direct our path as we seek His will for these wonderful opportunities, and pray that He would provide the volunteers and substantial

resources needed to accomplish what He is calling us to do. We are grateful to all of you for your prayers, support, and generosity!

## Mark Begins a PhD in Bible and Theology



By God's grace I [Mark] have been given the opportunity to complete my theological education by pursuing a PhD in Bible and Theology at Calvary University. When I began exploring the possibility of a PhD, one of the primary challenges was the lack of accredited conservative biblical PhD programs in

Colorado. I considered temporarily relocating to another state, but I did not want to put the work of The Cell Church on hold for five years or more while I went to school. Moreover, gaining acceptance into doctoral programs proved to be a challenge. The first school to which I applied rejected my application, most likely as a result of my criminal history.

But, as always, the Lord provided in accordance with His perfect will. Calvary University, which has its main campus in Kansas City, MO, recently opened a new campus in Fort Morgan, CO. When I visited the campus after fully revealing my background, the staff was very welcoming and demonstrated the acceptance and love of Christ. There was even some discussion about teaching opportunities, and I was able to connect the school's administration with the leadership at TUMI to discuss a possible academic partnership offering credit for The Cell Church's TUMI students.

Calvary's PhD is uniquely well-suited for my intended area of study. Most traditional Christian PhD programs require students to specialize in New Testament, Old Testament, Church History / Historical Theology, or Systematic Theology. Calvary is one of a very few dual-discipline PhD programs which require study of both the Old and New Testaments as



well as systematic theology. The program is rigorous, with the first year consisting of intensive Hebrew and Greek study. The second year focuses on exegesis and hermeneutics, while the third emphasizes biblical-theological analysis of the entire canon. The fourth year covers systematic theology, and the fifth year is dedicated to finishing the dissertation.

I am excited about the new opportunities that the Lord will provide for The Cell Church through this degree! A PhD will equip me more fully to teach our TUMI classes and other courses at a high level, honoring God's call in the lives of those current and former prisoners who we seek to serve by preparing them for ministry. I will also have increased

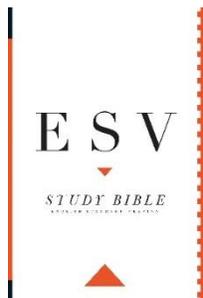
access to the Christian academic community, where I will be privileged to represent the scholarship of the prison church. I continue to be extremely grateful for your prayers as I undertake this final stage of my education!

## STUDY BIBLES FOR TESTIMONIES

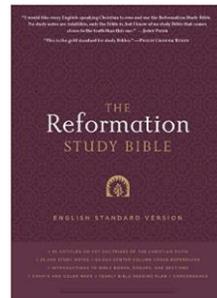
Jeremy L., a former prisoner and current member of The Cell Church house church in Westminster, has established a partnership between his employer and The Cell Church to offer free study Bibles for prisoners who send us a written testimony of their salvation and Christ's work in their lives. By sending us your testimony you agree to allow us to publish it in any format, including on our website, in this newsletter, or as a tri-fold tract. You may ask that we use your first name and last initial, first name only, or a pseudonym if you do not want us to include your full name when publishing your testimony. Moreover, our ministry reserves the right to choose to publish, or not to publish, any submissions we receive. Whether we choose to publish your testimony or not, we will send you a free study Bible upon your submission.

Submissions should be a minimum of five handwritten pages in length, but there is no maximum length requirement. Our ministry reserves the right to edit submissions for length before publication. If you submit a testimony you should also indicate which of the following four study Bibles you would like to receive:

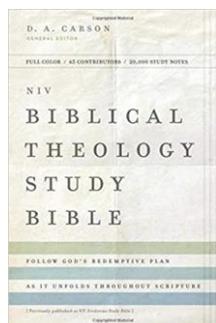
*ESV Study Bible*



*Reformation Study Bible*



*Biblical Theology Study Bible*



*Systematic Theology Study Bible*

