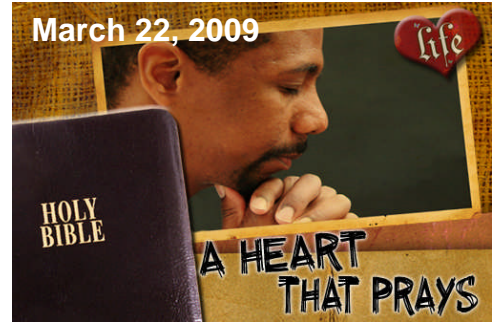


A Heart That Prays

Prayer is the means God has given us for the journey of loving and serving those in need. This week of prayer and journaling will help us explore the power of prayer in a world in need.



Nehemiah 1:1-4 (NIV) The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

Reflections

Last week, an inmate named Lynn hung herself in her cell at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCIW) at Jessup. Such events are rarely reported in the news, but they come to the attention of those of us in the Community of St. Dymas (CSD) who lead worship and Bible study at MCIW and at four other penal institutions in the state of Maryland.

One question posed by the inmates at our worship last Saturday night was if people who commit suicide go to hell. Inmates often ask questions that have challenged theologians for centuries. In one Bible study session, an inmate wanted to know if people who are not Christians will be saved. Another inmate demanded to know why a loving God would allow an innocent child to be brutally abused, as she was. Our pastor, Rev. Bill Lundgren, and our volunteer Bible study leaders answer these questions as best as they can, always emphasizing God's grace.

There are other questions that haunt the incarcerated. While some may either deny or minimize their crimes,

or blame them on someone else, there are still many others who lie awake in their bunks at night (in quarters often lacking sufficient heat in winter or air conditioning in summer), pondering what brought them to this place and wondering what lies ahead for them, knowing that their lives will never be the same. If you've ever felt trapped, or in despair, or utterly worthless, or hopeless, just multiply those feelings by a factor of ten, and you'll have some idea what it is like to be in prison.

Feelings like these must have gotten the better of Lynn, alone in her cell—even though just three weeks before, in a CSD Bible Study session, she had made a decision to accept Jesus Christ as her savior. Coming to faith is not a magic spell that instantly cures all one's ills; it is a slow process of growth and strengthening. Sadly, Lynn had mental and psychological problems that did not receive

sufficient attention from the institution, and she succumbed to despair.

But most of the inmates who have been participating in CSD worship and Bible study find that it gives them comfort and strength and hope. When "regular" people come in from outside to share worship with the inmates, it tells them that they are not junk that has been thrown away, out of sight and out of mind. Rather, it tells them that they do matter, because they are children of the same heavenly father. Just as Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise," so all believers—including those now in prison—will be together in Paradise with all our sins washed clean. That is true hope.

—Liz Fixsen

Contact Liz for more information about how you can join with other St. John members who serve the community of St. Dymas. (efixsen@yahoo.com.)

Pray this week...

Lord, help me to have your heart for the forgotten, marginalized, and poor. Open my eyes to see others as you do. Draw me to talk with you about their needs. Teach me to listen to the promptings of your Holy Spirit, so that I will not only pray, but also take action with compassion and love. Change me to be more like you. Amen.

Readings

Sunday, March 22

Nehemiah 1:1-4

Ask God for ways to improve the tragic situations that we encounter in this world. How does God help us work through this grief?

Monday, March 23

Psalm 86

Pray through the following psalm, and devote yourself and your heart to God and ask him to hear your prayers.

Tuesday, March 24

Ephesians 3:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:17

How would you like your prayer life to be? How do you think that would affect your love for others?

Wednesday, March 25

Matthew 18:19-20

Take time to consider how you would like to make praying with others a part of your prayer life.

Thursday, March 26

Romans 8:26

How has the Holy Spirit nudged your heart? What do you think God has in store for you? What is your commitment to God in answering his call to you to be a restorer in this world?

Friday, March 27

Acts 17:26-27

Why do you believe God placed you where he did? What good works do you think he may have prepared for you to do?

Saturday, March 28

Ephesians 1:18-20

Pray that God will fill you with his Holy Spirit so you might have the hope to which God has called you and his incomparably great power. Ask God to help you to rely only on his power and hope in serving others, not on your own.

Don't have a Bible? Access these scriptures at biblegateway.com.

Praying for the Poor

- Commit to pray for those in need.
- Pray for your eyes to be open to needs to which you can respond.
- Pray regularly, and also as the Lord prompts.
- Pray specifically for individuals and situations in need.
- Pray for issues & people you're passionate about.
- Pray for the people of God to be moved to action.
- Pray for help to remove barriers to your own responsiveness.

Resource: "Hope Lives: A Journey of Restoration" Copyright © 2008 Amber Van Schooneveld