

FOREWORD BY ERIC METAXAS

Loving
God

THE COST
OF BEING A
CHRISTIAN

CHARLES
COLSON

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Loving God Study Guide

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Study Guide by Art Lindsley and Anita Moreland (with contributions from Dr. Carl F. H. Henry, Charles W. Colson, Ellen Santilli, and Whitney Kuniholm)

Art direction: Curt Diepenhorst

Interior design: Kait Lamphere

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Prologue: Paradox

It was a glorious Easter Sunday, the spring sun sparkling and warm, the air fresh and sweet. Too nice a day to spend in prison, but that's where I was bound.

As I approached the sprawling complex of brick buildings surrounded by barbed wire fences, I remembered my first visit here nine months earlier. As in most states, Delaware's institutions were dangerously overcrowded. The legislature, though unwilling to allocate needed funds, was carping mercilessly at corrections officials. To help make his own assessment of the situation, Governor DuPont had asked me to report on conditions at Delaware State Prison.

On that steamy August day I had visited every corner of the complex. I had walked through dormitories so jammed with sweaty bodies that the air was difficult to breathe. I had seen the psycho ward where a man writhed convulsively against the chains around his bloodied wrists and ankles. Immune to sedation, without restraints he would have destroyed himself. I had continued on to the "hole," stopping to talk with each man isolated there in solitary lockup.

One, who introduced himself as Sam Casalvera, had been sentenced to life without parole. Sam was tough, his huge, muscled arms testifying to hours of weight lifting. His defiant gaze told me prison—even solitary confinement—had not broken his spirit.

Sam was the exception. By the end of the tour I was overwhelmed, as I am in so many prisons, by the sight and stench of death. It was

reflected in the inmates' eyes, in their head-bowed shuffle, in their endless staring at nothing through hand-clutched bars. The suicidal patient chained in the psychiatric unit was perhaps the most rational of all, I thought ironically; he was merely struggling to bring his body and spirit to the same point.

I asked the young chaplain if I could meet with the Christian inmates. We gathered in a small conference room off the warden's office. Of the eight prisoners present, all were lifers, seven were black.¹ These strong, earnest men were a dramatic contrast with what I had just seen. Joyous about their faith, they had resolute assurance that Jesus was alive and real, even in the midst of the human hopelessness of prison. We prayed together, holding hands around the table, and then I promised I'd be back.

A few months later we sent a Prison Fellowship seminar team into the Delaware prison. With the help of twenty volunteer laypeople from the nearby community, our two staff members (one an ex-con himself) conducted thirty-two hours of teaching. More than one hundred men signed up for that first in-prison seminar, and before the week was over, seventy-five met Christ. That made the week memorable, as did another unusual incident.

One study session was interrupted when two guards burst into the room, clamped handcuffs on a frightened young inmate, and hustled him out of the room to a waiting van. Those in the seminar, who knew only that he was being taken to court, prayed fervently.

Arriving in the courtroom, the inmate stood shaking before a stern-faced judge. "Young man," the judge said somberly, "I've been examining your records." He paused, then looked up. "And I've decided to reduce your sentence to time served. You're a free man.

"Good luck," he concluded, nodding at the speechless prisoner and rapping his gavel.

1. It was not surprising to find only eight Christians in a prison population of eight hundred. About 1 percent is the ratio we often find when we begin ministry in an institution.

“Thank you, your Honor,” the inmate choked; then, more loudly, “but sir, if it’s all the same to you, could I stay in prison the rest of this week? I’d like to finish the Prison Fellowship seminar.”

The judge, shocked, muttered something about working it out. The man was returned to the seminar’s expectant group of believers where there was much celebration.

During the months following I received a series of exciting reports about the Christian fellowship continuing to grow in Delaware. As spring approached, I knew I wanted to spend Easter with these brothers.

Now as I arrived at the front gate on Easter morning, I was met by the corrections commissioner, more than seventy-five Prison Fellowship volunteers, several judges including a justice of the state supreme court, and a bevy of other state officials. We were quickly escorted around the metal detectors and processing rooms—none of the usual search routines this morning.

The Christian inmates, more than one hundred in number at this point, had gotten permission to host a breakfast for us. As we were served in the mess hall, I took a perverse pleasure in watching the justice turn away from the dried-out porridge and sausages of dubious origin.

One of our enthusiastic hosts rapped his spoon against a cup, and when the group quieted he announced that an inmate, Sam Casalvera, would read a poem composed for the occasion—and dedicated to Chuck Colson.

Sam rose, wearing the broadest grin I’d ever seen; it was obvious he was not the same rebellious convict I’d met in solitary nine months earlier. I didn’t need to ask what had happened.

Sam cleared his throat and began reading:

*I heard you were coming to worship once more
With souls who were floundering when you came before.*

He hesitated, took a deep breath, and continued.

*We had direction but needed a push
You made us a promise and also a wish.*

Sam paused to take a wrinkled cloth from his pocket and dab his eyes.

*Your promise was kept—Prison Fellowship you sent.
Whatever I write can't tell you what it meant.
Some who attended made your wish come true.
They gave their life to Jesus, as you did too.*

Men and women in prison don't cry. It's a sign of weakness, and weakness can be dangerous in prison. But Sam could not control his emotions. Tears flowed down his cheeks and his broad shoulders heaved.

I rose and walked to the front of the hall, put my arm around his shoulders, and took the paper from him. For a moment I thought I would dissolve along with Sam, but somehow I was able to read the remaining lines of his poem. I've loved poetry all my life and treasure many classics, but none have affected me as deeply as Sam Casalvera's earnest stanzas.

After breakfast our inmate hosts escorted us out of the mess hall and on a long procession to the chapel on the other side of the prison. As we began to cross the compound, I squinted through the bright sunlight and stopped short at the scene ahead. A crowd of prisoners surrounded the chapel, some carrying placards. In two hundred prison visits I'd never seen anything like it. Instinctively I reviewed the possibilities: a riot brewing; a demonstration against prison conditions; Muslim inmates protesting our presence?

A few steps further and I could make out, to my amazement and

relief, the crude lettering on the signs: COME TO THE CHAPEL, read one. JESUS SETS THE PRISONERS FREE! was another.

Just as people in prison don't cry, neither do they call attention to their faith. To do so invites scorn, ridicule, or worse. But this group of Christians was parading the compound, advertising chapel!

Their daring had broken barriers. Men were gathering from all over the prison. The chapel was packed. And because three hundred prisoners were in solitary lockup, the Christian brothers had mounted four speakers on the chapel roof so the service could be heard throughout the prison. (Judging by the size of the amplifiers, it could also be heard by neighbors for miles around.)

The prison choir began the service. Their task was to warm up the crowd, and they were a roaring success. Even the supreme court justice, sandwiched between two muscular convicts in the front row, loosened up. Struggling at first to maintain his dignity, he gradually began tapping his foot and soon was grinning and clapping with the rest.

As I sat on the platform, waiting my turn at the pulpit, my mind began to drift back in time . . . to scholarships and honors earned, cases argued and won, great decisions made from lofty government offices. My life had been the perfect success story, the great American dream fulfilled. But all at once I realized that it was *not* my success God had used to enable me to help those in this prison, or in hundreds of others just like it. My life of success was not what made this morning so glorious—all my achievements meant nothing in God's economy. No, the real legacy of my life was my biggest failure—that I was an ex-convict. My greatest humiliation—being sent to prison—was the beginning of God's greatest use of my life; He chose the one experience in which I could not glory for His glory.

Confronted with this staggering truth, I discovered in those few moments in the prison chapel that my world was turned upside down. I understood with a jolt that I had been looking at life backward. But now I could see: only when I lost everything I thought made Chuck

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CHARLES COLSON was a popular and widely known author, speaker, and radio commentator. A former presidential aide to Richard Nixon and founder of the international ministry Prison Fellowship, he wrote several books that have shaped Christian thinking on a variety of subjects, including *Born Again*, *Loving God*, *How Now Shall We Live?*, *The Good Life*, and *The Faith*.

His radio broadcast, *BreakPoint*, at one point aired to two million listeners. Chuck Colson donated all of his royalties, awards, and speaking fees to Prison Fellowship Ministries.

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