

The Second Death

When I was in seminary I remember a lecture by the theologian Paul Tillich in which he discussed our understanding of death. He indicated that our “fear of dying” is a fear of being forgotten. He said that is why we push up monuments and tombstones above the earth. I believe the fear of being forgotten may be the reason so many people in prison have a fear of “dying in prison.” Many who come to prison experience being forgotten. The street becomes a distant memory. Family and friends lose contact, and over time a sense of being in a world that is hostile and grounded in a sea of hatred sets in.

I remember reading about a prisoner in Angola Prison who requested to be able to die in an outside hospital. He did not want to die in prison. His request was granted, but after he died they found in his will that he wanted to be buried inside the prison where his friends were buried. Another man, who was a New York State prisoner, was in an outside hospital prison ward. While there he was granted parole, and they moved him out of the prison ward down the hall to a regular hospital room. A few days later he died. He told me he was thankful he could die a free man. I also remember Napoleon who had been in prison for 38 years. He was quite sick and had been given a month to live. I found that he had been in the military when he was young. The parole board was at the prison that week and I asked if they would consider granting parole to Napoleon so that he could die in an outside Veterans Hospital. They granted parole and on the day when he was to be released, Napoleon came down the prison corridor to go out the front gate. He said to me: “Rev. I’m going home today.” He died outside two weeks later.

Carl Michalson, in his book, *Faith for Personal Crisis*, has a chapter on death. In it he says: “Every man really faces two deaths...there is the biological event marked by mortuaries and monuments. But there is also the personal event, the spiritual death which often goes unnoticed.”

He goes on to say, it is what the Book of Revelation calls, “the second death.” The seer in the Book of Revelation said to the Church at Sardis, “I know your works: you give the appearance of being alive, but you are dead already.” (3:1)

For many people in prison, when the absence of hope sets in, the second death becomes a reality. When a person believes he/she has no future and the present and past are unacceptable, they become the “walking dead man or woman.” In the future they expect to meet a parole board that believes you are what you did, not who you are, or who you can be.

In our Exodus Program we encourage people to create life-giving goals that have the power to pull you into the future. We believe that your future is your present. Because your future is life-giving, you become the New Man or Woman, even when you live in an arena of death. You now give “the appearance of being alive,” and you are.