

Getting Through the Wilderness and Crossing Jordan:
Exodus Concepts

by Gordon W. Brown

This paper is dedicated to the memory and inspiration of
William Stephenson “Bama” Battle one of our “Inmate Founders.”

In the Exodus Study Groups at Eastern and Woodbourne, the Biblical account of The Exodus from Egypt is a metaphor for the journey the incarcerated must take. In this story, the Israelites had been held in captivity by Egypt for generations. When they were finally freed, they wandered for some 40 years in the wilderness until reaching the River Jordan and at last crossed over it into the Promised Land. There can be little doubt that the surprise of capture, the endurance of trial, and the shock of sentencing resulting in years of captivity is devastating. Nevertheless, in profound or in subtle ways, the transition from criminality to citizenship must start in the courtroom. In almost every case the experience of imprisonment and the feelings of hopelessness and despair are overwhelming for years and the thoughts of finding ways to get released overshadow any understanding that a transforming journey is coming. However, in time, many people begin to recognize why they are in the predicament they are in and *come to terms* with their personal role in their own incarceration. When this occurs a new challenge is foisted upon the individual. That challenge is to change. Period.

Change, in our view, requires a thorough inventory of the *past*. This exploration is not intended to be self-flagellation. It may seem trite, but even for individuals, we need to understand our history so that we don't repeat it. Also, we need to understand our motives for that old lifestyle. When we recognize those motives are within, we can now struggle to make

fundamental changes necessary to improve our inner life, to become *life-givers* instead of life-takers, to become a positive example instead of a negative influence. Part of this exploration will inevitably return our memory to sentencing and jailing and our role in our own destiny. Transition begins with this experience. Without a complete understanding of how we landed in jail, we will not see the path from capture to the wilderness and from the wilderness across Jordan to the Promised Land.

Once the transition begins for the inner being, then the practical aspects of creating a life worthy of living in free society can begin. We have to recognize where we are, what is around us, how we relate to it, what must be resisted and what must be embraced. Many correctional facilities are like a barren wasteland and opportunities for enlightenment, education, new information, deeper understanding, and so forth, must be created for ourselves. This is indeed a difficult and daunting task. However, if one can keep hope and peace close at hand, it is likely that one day the opportunity for *life-giving* and life-enhancing programs will come your way. Some facilities have minimal opportunities, perhaps only the programs mandated by the state and a GED course, while others have a richness of programming by comparison. College programs, spiritual practice, the influence of the arts, certificates in serious educational studies, EXODUS, Network, PACE, Lifer's groups, etc. are building blocks of a viable future. Coupled with the uplifting influence of the volunteers, staff, professionals, and fellow prisoners who administer these classes and programs, our value as humans is rediscovered and validated. The seeds of wisdom and confidence are sown. The *present is received* when the advantages around us are recognized, when the roses are identified among the thorns.

If one is not immersed in the present, the here and now, even if that existence is inside the walls, the future is unmanageable. Our awareness exists right now! Our memories and our hopes exist right now. So we have to live right now. And we are planning for the future right now. So hopefully, transition is happening right now. If it isn't we are destined to be stuck lamenting the past, or blaming others for it. We could be biding our time until the gate swings open and we are tossed into the wilderness unprepared. Or we are full of pipe dreams and wishful thinking without substance. The *future is open* to us only when we begin to visualize it and live it right now.

In the present we will recognize those qualities in us that are *life-giving* and we can reject the qualities that are self-destructive. These kinds of recognitions come to us during and after experiences like the ones mentioned above. Or we may get our start because a wise person, a fellow prisoner perhaps, shines a light on our smarter self and says, "Take a look! There is a loving and capable human in there waiting to get out." The transition can continue when we are prepared to listen to the wise. We grow when we seek formal education and reject ignorance. We begin to *come to terms with life* and cope with *our struggle* when we diminish false pride and accept the knowledgeable advice and nurturing interest of those who really can help us to prepare to enter the wilderness when released.

Once, a man was stuck in a deep rut. He wasn't even sure how he had gotten there, but sure enough the walls were high and some of the corners were very dark. Each time he heard someone above pass by he would call out, "Throw me a rope!" or "Send down a ladder!" or "Pull me out of here!" or just plain "Help me! Please, help me." One day he happened to call out at the right moment and was heard. Pretty soon an old man jumped down into the rut with him.

The prisoner turned to him, “What kind of fool are you? Now we are both trapped in this rut.” The wise old guy replied, “Oh, I’ve been here myself. I know the way out.” Although it can make us feel unsure, even scared, we have to find those whom we can trust to help us along the way. In spite of our fears and regardless of obstacles, both real and imagined, we have to continue to seek the practical training, the advice of the experienced, and the clarity of mind necessary to acquire the skills that will improve our lot while in captivity and expand our options later on.

When we recognize that we are sojourners and that the path to true freedom is under our feet and rises before us, then, and only then, can we begin to design our future. Using all we have inside, all we have discovered, our imagination and our thinking self, our changes of heart, our new found trust of others, our recognition of our *past* and *present* - using all these things and all that will come to us, we can express a new vision. We are free to make plans. We are free to see the Promised Land for the first time. We can create a vision of the Promised Land that pleases us and encourages us. We’ll have a new vision that honors the discovery that the person I am now is not the person that came to prison. We can live a life that keeps us free regardless of where we are.

If while inside we only wait, when the door is opened to the wilderness we won’t survive. The wilderness can be full of surprise, challenge, struggle, pitfalls, hang-ups, and enemies. To get to that glorious *future*, to get over Jordan to the Promised Land that we have created for ourselves, we have to survive captivity, conquer the wilderness, and stay out of prison. The best preparations to succeed after release are made prior to release. The transition has already begun.