

Daily View

“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’” Hebrews 3:13

April 17, 2020

News

Yesterday, the White House released its 3-phase plan for getting back to almost “normal.” Look for an email later today.

Just got news that the son of the preacher where our son Dave attends was in serious auto accident and was life-flighted to a hospital. The preacher’s name is Jeb Reaves and his son’s name is Will. Please say a prayer for that family this morning.

The Tower of Prayer

“...pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18

Speaking of prayer, I told the story on Wednesday of how, as an 8 year old, I was inspired to pray, primarily because I thought I was going to die at any minute. Today, I have a similar story, but I was 24 years old when I learned this lesson.

When I started a study of law in 1971, I was in a “career management training” program with a loan company and since I was going to night law school, they laid me off, assuming I’d rather be a lawyer instead of making loans and repossessing cars for the rest of my life. I couldn’t argue with that. I was out of work for about 4 months, when I got a call from the state unemployment office asking if I would be interested in taking a job at “DVI.” I seriously thought they said “DMV.” I was not excited about working for DMV, but I needed a job, so I said “sure.” But instead of a safe, if unexciting, job at DMV, I found myself interviewing for a job at Deuel Vocational Institute in Tracy (DVI). “Deuel Vocational Institute” sounds like a trade school, but it is far from it. It’s a state prison, originally designed to house youthful, rehabilitatable offenders. That changed almost overnight in 1957 when 13 young gang members were incarcerated there and formed *La Eme*, also known as the “Mexican Mafia.” By the 70s, when I was there, DVI was still their primary headquarters.

I got more stories per hour from DVI than any other experience in my life, and I was only there for a couple of months. Working there was mostly terrifying. I worked the graveyard shift — an appropriate name for it since 44 people were stabbed to death in the year that I worked there. New recruits like me worked half the shift in a housing wing and the other half in one of the towers that guarded the perimeter of the prison. The *best* gig was to work in one of the wings for the first half of the shift, midnight to 4 AM, and then finish the shift in the tower — there is no inmate interaction in that scenario.

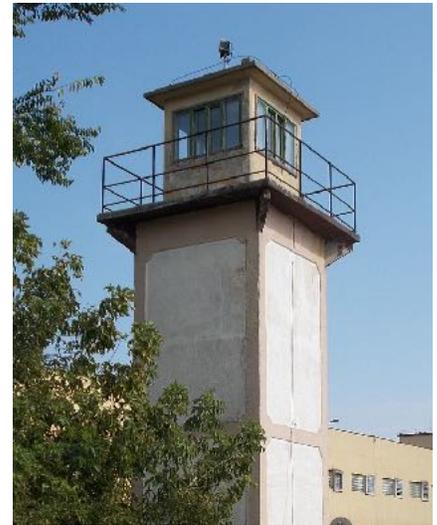
The towers were fortresses, chock full of weaponry of all kinds — rifles, pistols, tear gas — you name it, we had it. And we had been trained to use all of it. Short of an attack by an army of tanks and artillery, we could handle just about any assault from a tower. So working in the wing first, from midnight to 4 AM, *then* in the tower from 4-8 AM, one felt safe and secure. However, working in the tower from 12-4 AM and *then* the wing from 4-8 was a different story.

Breakfast began at 7 AM so the inmates filed in and out of the dining hall from 7-8 AM. Rookie guards got the unenviable assignment of standing in the lane between inmates filing in and out. Seared forever in my brain are the tattooed faces of hardened criminals, staring at me as they walked by, doing their best to intimidate me (it worked).

The point is, if I was stationed in the tower during the *second* half of the shift, from 4-8 AM, I felt good, safe. But if I was in the tower *first* half, from 12-4 AM, then I would literally be standing in the middle of some of the most dangerous criminals in the world for an hour. So, *how do you suppose I spent my time from 12-4?* Look at the title. That tower became “*the tower of prayer.*” I spent much of my time praying from 12-4 AM. I learned what “fervently (James 5:16-17) and “pray without ceasing” meant because I prayed almost non-stop.

I have been reflecting on that “tower of prayer” experience for almost 50 years. It reminds me that prayer is not a vending machine experience: *insert \$1.00 (pray), get sprite (answer)*. We are told to pray in all circumstances, good or bad and leave it at that. But I only prayed fervently in the hours before I faced danger and very little when I wasn’t. Not only that, looking back on it, the prayers I did pray were selfish prayers. Sure, I needed to stay safe — I had a young wife and child at home. But, my prayers lacked thanksgiving and were all about staying *stab-free*. And I never thought about saying a prayer for the inmates that I was about to stand among. They were a sad, hopeless, damaged throng of men.

A few years later, I had opportunity to return to DVI in a completely different capacity. I went there a few times with another preacher and taught some Bible classes. I was struck by the number of men who were hungry for truth and the gospel — some *good news*. I would do things differently now than I did when working in the prison. It helps to imagine myself in that “tower of prayer” more often than not. After all, life is full of uncertainty. If nothing else, we’ve certainly learned that in the last couple of months.



Prison tower. Stock photo.