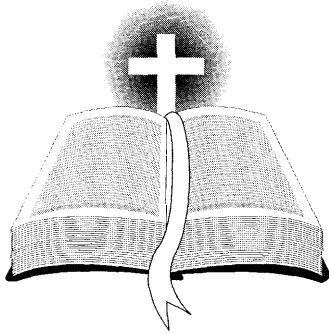


CHAPTER THREE



TURN FELLOW CHRISTIANS INTO PRISONERS OF HOPE

A little girl snuggled with her grandmother as they read from a child's Bible. After three or four stories, the grandmother was ready to stop and get her granddaughter ready for bed. But the little girl kept insisting she read another, then another, and still another. Finally, in exasperation, the grandmother said, "Why do you want to hear so many all of a sudden?" Her granddaughter responded, "Because, Grandma . . . I just realized you never know what God is going to do next!"

How is it with you? Is your Christian life filled with a similar atmosphere of suspense? Do you find yourself standing on tiptoe, as it were, alive with anticipation? Are you waiting daily to see what God is bringing around the corner as he parades before you fresh demonstrations of renewal, enticing you with preparations for fuller revival in his church? In other words, are you a prisoner of hope?¹

When our family moved to the metro New York area in the early 1990s, we did it for one major reason. During previous trips to the city in my work with the prayer movement there, I had met thousands living with a conviction that God wanted to awaken his church in that city in answer to their prayers. Everything told me that God would not disappoint them; an "urban Pentecost" was in the offing.² I wanted us to be near enough to the action so we could see it,

experience it, and learn from it firsthand. Since then, the prayer movement has greatly increased, including an ongoing twenty-four-hour prayer vigil by over a hundred churches. The suspense mounts! The hope of revival pervades every part of the body of Christ. I call these people “prisoners of hope.” And to every messenger of hope in New York, these revival-captivated believers are “our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes” (1 Thess. 2:19).

Are there people like that in your life? People who have grasped on to the hope for revival and live out each day with the confidence and expectation that God is about to “surprise” us spectacularly? Do you want there to be more people like that? Essentially, that is your mission as a Messenger of Hope.

In *The Hope at Hand* I define prisoners of hope as pacesetters for world revival. I explain practical ways to uncover, mobilize, and even multiply such people. Now in this companion volume, I want to speak specifically on how to activate such pacesetters through the *message* we share. They may be sitting around our dinner table, attending our home Bible study group, or scattered throughout the Sunday morning congregation. In a very real sense, they actually form the first phase of the revival we’ve come to tell them about.

Why Call Them Prisoners?

The phrase “prisoners of hope” was first introduced to me by one of the leading Black Christian pastors in South Africa. Within the spiritual ferment of South Africa, he witnessed repeatedly how seemingly ordinary Christians made a tremendous difference for the healing of his nation. Even in cities like Soweto, they labored for a hope that was kingdom-sized in its dimensions, a compelling vision of God that would not let them go. It was their daily passion. As a result, they transformed history.

Certainly *prisoner* is a good word for such people. Have you ever watched *Court TV* on the cable system? *Court TV* brings America face to face with some of the best-known prisoners in our land. In the courtroom as they stand and face the camera, the accused



appear to be as free as anybody else. But in truth, they are not their own. Outside the courtroom they are completely at the disposal of the penal system. Decisions about what they eat, how they dress, and where they sleep are controlled by forces beyond themselves. On the screen they may look like you or me. But in their hearts they are preoccupied and controlled by a totally different agenda.

The same should be said of every Christian. Zechariah describes it: “As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit. Return to your fortress, O prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you” (Zech. 9:11–12). Because of Christ’s finished work for us, God is forever in the business of transforming prisoners of “waterless pits” (have you experienced any “pits” lately?) into prisoners of hope. Not just any kind of hope either. In this context, Zechariah is talking about nothing less than the supreme hope of personal and worldwide *revival*. Look at some of his preceding words: “See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation. . . . He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zech. 9:9–10).

And how are such prisoners of hope created? In one simple phrase God tells us: “Even now I *announce* that I will restore twice as much to you” (Zech. 9:12, emphasis added). That’s how it happens! That’s what happens to others when we are effective Messengers of Hope.

Dying to Be Captured with Hope

Without question the people who need our message are, more often than not, bound up in “waterless pits.” In his book *Why Preach? Why Listen?*, Yale professor William Muehl writes: “It is instructive, if somewhat dismaying, to realize how many of the men and women in the pews almost did not come to church that morning. And that in all possibility most of them feel that they are there under false pretenses, that everyone around them feels more confidently Christian than they do themselves.”³ Does that sound like the people who sit around you during Sunday worship? You’d be amazed!

William Hendricks's book *Exit Interviews* tells us there are reasonable explanations why many are leaving the church today.⁴ Most could be summarized, however, in one word—*disillusionment*. “Disillusionment with claims made and not kept in personal relationships, stipulations about the Christian gospel that could not be substantiated, suffocating boredom in programs that demanded much but delivered little, and feelings of being marginalized when there were struggles with doubt or with life patterns and bondages from the past. And that’s just the beginning.” That’s how Gordon MacDonald reports Hendricks’s findings.⁵ What do you think you would discover if you interviewed those you see on a Sunday? Are they prisoners of hope? Or are they an “exit” waiting to happen?

Christian missiologists observe that inner-city churches are often overwhelmed with a spirit of hopelessness, drained by the massive urban challenges around them. But suburban churches also deal with debilitated disciples, “a generation that is discouraged, depressed, tired, lonely, and feeling guilty.”⁶ There are waterless pits there, too, despite sociological differences.

Furthermore, recent surveys have indicated that evangelicals, in general, are prone to see a less promising future than many other segments of our society.⁷ In addition, the people in the pews have a less rosy view of God’s work in the body than even the pastor does.⁸ You don’t have to look long to conclude that churches are often “in a defensive crouch against the power of secular individualism and the agenda of the modern world.”⁹ One leader bravely raises the question whether Christians are actually *destroying* America due to an impoverished faith in the holy truth that God can use us to restore our decaying culture. Our own endless inner struggle with issues like selfishness and racism have suffocated what little hope we may have had, or may have offered.¹⁰ If we are prisoners to anything, it is survival, not revival.

In other writings, I have suggested many can be trapped in “boxes of pea-sized Christianity” (another term for Zechariah’s “waterless pits”).¹¹ We harbor an atmosphere of unbelief, falsely concluding that the level of Christianity we now experience is all God has for us until Jesus comes again. Ours is a predisposition toward the status quo (survival, not revival).¹² How else can you explain that over 90 percent of Christian resources are consumed by Christians on them-

selves?¹³ We lack a passion for revival because we have attempted to make life comfortable without it. We've convinced ourselves to settle for a spiritual shortfall. It's no surprise that in a recent survey, 76 percent of pastors listed as their most pressing priority to motivate their people to pursue spiritual growth, and to motivate the laity to engage in meaningful ministry.¹⁴

Identifying other waterless pits within a very different arena, the president of the Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies wrote a courageous plea to U.S. mission executives. Without a massive transformation in the U.S. missionary enterprise, it's over, he said. Apart from a dynamic movement of God's Spirit in a true spiritual awakening that ignites people with holy passion for world evangelization, the missionary agencies in North America could, "in the not too distant future, appear analogous to an abandoned ship buried by the tides on a sandy seashore with only its weather-beaten ribs as visible testimony to far better and more useful days."¹⁵

Prayer versus Pits

There is one great exception to the map of desert places we might survey. A prayer movement has been expanding and accelerating in every part of the body of Christ. This nationwide (and global) manifestation of concerted prayer—expressed in small groups, prayer summits, concerts of prayer, massive city-wide gatherings, national days of prayer and fasting, stadium rallies, and millions of youth united on their high school and college campuses—consists of an army of prisoners of hope! Their heart-level transformation has come about as a result, in part, of *how* they have prayed their vision for revival. But above all, they are an answer to their own prayers. There are literally millions of them throughout our nation. They are a signal that God intends to raise up many more.

I think, for example, of the hundreds of thousands who every year march, sing, and pray in the streets of our cities in what are known as "Marches for Jesus." Sometimes these prisoners of hope—filled with bold hope for revival in their communities—sing a world-renowned contemporary revival prayer that concludes with this cho-

rus: “Shine, Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father’s glory. Blaze, Spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire. Flow, river, flow, flood the nations with grace and mercy. Send forth your Word, Lord, and let there be light.”¹⁶ This is the essence of the message that is capturing believers everywhere.

Recently I traveled to Purdue University, where I spent an evening with four thousand teenagers, seventh through twelfth grades, discussing the message of hope and concluding with a two-hour concert of prayer. Were they tracking with me? Absolutely, right from the very beginning. I couldn’t get them to stop praying—and it was already 10:00 P.M.! I’ve experienced this with countless other teens in similar gatherings. Prisoners of hope! They can appear at any age. They believe God is the key to their future, and they say so.¹⁷

On another front, I recall five thousand adults throughout the Pacific Northwest who, in 1995, signed a covenant to pray *every day* for revival, until revival comes. Today they are joined by multitudes of others across the land assembling in fasting and prayer convocations, willing to set aside all meals for days at a time because they are filled with hope in what God is about to do. Certainly the Promise Keepers laymen’s movement contains ranks of such prisoners. Gathering by the millions, whether in stadiums or on the Mall in Washington, D.C., they are (as one gathering in D.C. recently called itself) Christians willing to “stand in the gap,” by prayer most of all. Why? Because they know that revival is the only hope for our nation. Further, they are convinced that revival is coming.

A similar movement of women that started in Houston said it all by the name they gave themselves—Promise *Reapers*. After all, prisoners of hope are primary beneficiaries—the reapers—of all their prayers and all of God’s promises, not only as he revives them and their churches, but also as he brings spiritual awakening to the whole nation.

It’s no coincidence that Zechariah’s discussion of prisoners of hope in chapter 9 is preceded by the final verses of chapter 8, which (as I detail in *Concerts of Prayer*) describe city-wide and nationwide prayer movements that are seeking the face of God.¹⁸ Zechariah concludes with a summary of the awakening that springs from the movement: “In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew [one of the praying people] by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that

God is with you” (Zech. 8:23). That hope—nations acknowledging the manifest presence of God among his people—is centered on the coming King (Zech. 9:9). He mobilizes parched and barren believers to lead them home (9:11–12). Therefore, God announces that he will restore to them twice as much as they’ve lost in their pits of despair. The message of hope goes forth: God will answer this mighty prayer movement with extraordinary wonders for the sake of all peoples (vv. 10, 13–17). The only response required is to surrender to his vision and to wrap their lives around nothing less.

Created by God

If you want to be a Messenger of Hope, your major assignment is to announce your vision for revival in such a way that others are conquered by it, gratefully, and brought into the victory procession. Are you working to take others captive? Are you asking God to give you prisoners of hope?

As you’ll see from the second half of this book, the very way you deliver your message will multiply prisoners in simple, natural ways. But for your encouragement, let me hasten to add, prisoners of hope are created by God. Just as Jesus’ fearless words, “Lazarus, come out” (John 11:43), produced deliverance out of death, so prisoners of hope are sovereignly raised up by the life-giving Spirit. He himself transforms the Word of God in our mouths into a compelling message of resurrection proportions. Speaking of faith (and faith is the evidence of things hoped for, so that hope must always precede faith, as we know from Hebrews 11:6), John Calvin writes:

If we honestly consider within ourselves how much our thought is blind to the heavenly secrets of God and how greatly our heart distrusts all things, we shall not doubt that faith [and thus hope] greatly surpasses all the power of our nature, and that faith is a unique and precious gift of God.¹⁹

You cannot produce prisoners of hope, but God can! What he needs is faithful agents through whom he can get the job done.

When you properly deliver the message of hope, the Spirit will unleash two immediate responses in your hearers: (1) *Holy desper-*

ation. They will conclude from God's Word that the hope of revival he offers is too wonderful for them to produce themselves. The message will always highlight how helpless and hopeless we sinners are. It will contrast our current condition against the glorious promises God waits to fulfill within us. It will make us restless to climb out of our waterless pits. (2) *Holy anticipation*. Based on the same message, your hearers will conclude that God's promised revival is too wonderful for them to live without any longer. It will fill them with spiritual ambition—not only restlessness to get out of the pits, but also eagerness to move into the fuller dimensions of kingdom life that await us in a God-given awakening to Christ.

Thus, with a hope before them that is too wonderful to personally produce but too wonderful to live without, they will be conquered by the unparalleled hope you herald. This magnificent obsession, born of desperation and anticipation, is a chief hallmark of all prisoners of hope.

The Hope at Hand gives a whole chapter to analyzing prisoners of hope. There, however, I call them "the determined people."²⁰ Determined they are! The Bible describes them as those who "wait" on God to intervene, or who "watch" for his work of renewal. Let's dub them "Wait-Watchers!" Similar to "Weight-Watchers," their vision of how beautiful things could become makes them determined to set aside all substitutes, to sacrifice whatever it takes to see that vision come to pass.

Exploring biblical hope, Jacques Ellul cautions those who wait on God that they are not engaged in an empty, passive, hollow, drowsy kind of relationship with him. "The waiting is 100,000 times more difficult than action. It demands much more of the person. . . . Waiting is decisive. . . . The promise is fulfilled every time in connection with the person who bet his whole life on that promise, that is, in the expectation of its fulfillment."²¹

Seven Steps to Watch For

In conclusion, as you seek to turn fellow Christians into prisoners of hope—Wait-Watchers—with your message of the hope of revival, expect these seven steps to be a part of the transformation you'll see in those who are ready to receive the message you bring.



1. *Awake*—God speaks to the hearers through your message, stirs up faith, and makes them alive with new hope in Christ for renewal and revival.
2. *Agree*—They find others who share that same hope and who are willing to join them in pursuing God’s promise of revival.
3. *Ask*—On the basis of the hope revealed to them through your message, they first of all communicate with God about this in prayer, especially in united prayer with other prisoners.
4. *Act*—They also couple their prayers with appropriate daily obedience that prepares them for a greater work, as God pours out his Spirit in a fresh awakening to Christ in answer to their prayers.
5. *Await*—They remain expectant, always watching for the answers, keeping one another encouraged in hope, and unwilling to cease praying or preparing until full revival comes.
6. *Accept*—Furthermore, when they are able to identify preliminary answers to their prayers—first installments of renewal—they receive this with celebration, and give further obedience as appropriate. Thus, every step in the fulfillment of the hope leads them to praise God more and to seek him for even greater demonstrations of his faithfulness and power in the next step.
7. *Acclaim*—They themselves will begin to share this message of hope with those around them, so that prisoners of hope ultimately become Messengers of Hope, who in turn transform fellow Christians into prisoners of hope.

In the second half of this book, I want to share with you practical ways to capture prisoners of hope with your message of hope, in line with these seven steps. But for now, the more important question before you as a potential messenger is this: Do I have the confidence about God-given awakening needed to take fellow Christians captive? Are my convictions solid enough to sustain me in the battle as an agent of revival? Can I persist in my role as Christ’s herald even when it feels like the hope grows dim? Will I keep at it into the twenty-first century, if need be? The next chapter helps you find that confidence. For without confidence, no messenger can survive.

Lord, help me to hold out,
Lord, help me to hold out,
Lord, help me to hold out
until my change comes.

My way may not be easy
You did not say that it would be.
But if it gets dark,
I can't see my way,
You told me to put my trust in Thee,
that's why I'm asking You.

Lord, help me to hold out,
Lord, help me to hold out,
Lord, help me to hold out
until my change comes.

Lord, help me to hold out!
Lord, help me to hold out!
Lord, help me to hold out!
Lord, help me to hold out!
Lord, help me to hold out!
Lord, help me to hold out!

I believe that I can hold out!
I believe that I can hold out!
I believe that I can hold out!
until my change comes.

James Cleveland,
"Lord, Help Me to Hold Out" (1974),
taken from *Conversations with God:
Two Centuries of Prayers by African-Americans*