

Unexpected Fellowship with the King

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 October 2021

Preacher: Bruce Perkins

[0 : 00] Well, I bring you greetings from your university, Oklahoma Baptist University, owned by the Baptist Church of Oklahoma, now known as Oklahoma Baptist.

! I still have a hard time getting that name change in my head here. It'll always be DCO to me, I guess, but Oklahoma Baptist, and we appreciate that. And because of your giving through the cooperative program, some of that flows through Shawnee, and we're glad that it does.

And so I bring you greetings from Dr. Thomas, our president, and let you know that things are well on Bison Hill. I think we've weathered the COVID storm, or the worst of it anyway.

We still have some remnants left, don't we? But everything is back to normal this fall. All the activities and theater and music and athletics, and everybody's on campus.

And we've been blessed thus far with good health. We might have had any major outbreaks or anything like that. And so we're grateful for that. And we just ask you to continue to pray for us every day as we equip students to live all of life all for Jesus.

[1 : 11] Every bit of it. Every nook and cranny of life to be lived for His glory. So you pray for us. We appreciate that. Well, he had no reason to expect that year 37 would look any differently than year 36.

Or year 35. And he had no reason to believe that year 38 would look any differently than year 37. But on this particular day, a knock came to his door.

And the door was opened and there was a messenger from the king. And the king looked him squarely in the eyes and he said, The king wants to see you.

I'm sure his first thought was, Me? What would the king want with me? Anytime a king summons you, it's pretty serious business, isn't it?

Have I done something to offend the king? Have I broken a law? Why would he want to see me?

[2 : 26] You see, year after year for 36 years, 36 years, Jehoiakon's day had begun and ended exactly the same.

But in the 37th year of his imprisonment, there came the knock at the door. The king wants to see you.

The king wants to see you. It was an opportunity that appeared out of nowhere. Certainly unexpected. And really also undeserved.

And this opportunity is recorded for us in the second book of Kings. So I invite you to turn there with me this morning. Second Kings. The very last chapter.

Chapter 25. And we'll begin reading in the 27th verse. Second Kings 25, 27. Ooh, I like the sound of the pages.

[3 : 33] That's good. I appreciate Bibles on phones. I really do. But there's something about hearing the pages turn that always bless my heart. Second Kings 25, verse 27.

This is what we read. On the 27th day of the 12th month of the 37th year of the exile of Judah's king Jehoiakon, Ebel Merodot, king of Babylon, in the year he became king, pardoned king Jehoiakon of Judah and released him from prison.

He spoke kindly to him and set his throne over the thrones of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiakon changed his prison clothes and he dined regularly in the presence of the king of Babylon for the rest of his life.

And as for his allowance, a regular allowance was given to him by the king, a portion for each day for the rest of his life. The knock came, the door opened, the messenger said, the king wants to see you.

An unexpected opportunity, an undeserved opportunity. And even as he followed the messenger, I'm sure, into the king's throne room, he was still thinking about all those things. Why me? What

does he want to do with me?

[4 : 52] Have I done something wrong? Why would the king want to see me of all people? I've been in prison now for 36 years, almost 37 years, in the 37th year. And what would he want to do with me, a prisoner of exile?

But then he came to the king and notice in verse 28, the king spoke kindly to him. I can only imagine at that particular moment, Jehoiakon went, and the weight of all those concerns and those questions just kind of melted off his shoulders.

The king spoke kindly to him. Now, we can debate the king's motives as to why he might have spoken kindly to Jehoiakon. The likelihood is that it was customary and traditional that when a king became king, and this was right at the beginning of Evel Meridoc's reign over Babylon, when the king became king, he would often do something to ingratiate himself with his subjects, with the people.

Performed some act of kindness or mercy or grace that would cause them to say, he is on our side, he's for us, not against us, and so we're going to give him our loyalty.

And there were a lot of Hebrews living in Babylon that had been deported when Jerusalem fell. And their king had been subject to imprisonment.

[6 : 19] What better way to ingratiate himself with all of these Hebrews that lived in his land than to pardon their king? So it's pretty likely that that's the reason he decided to do that and bestow this gift of grace and mercy upon Jehoiakon.

But regardless of the case, it was an opportunity that came along that he didn't see coming. 25,000 men and women are incarcerated in the state of Oklahoma.

Collectively, that would be the 17th largest city in the state. Larger population than 97% of the towns and cities in our state.

Isn't that amazing? Isn't that amazing? That collectively, it would be the 17th largest city in our state. Larger than Jenks, Sepulpa, Sand Springs, Claremore, Clinton.

Bigger than Altus, Ardmore, McAllister, Ada. Bigger than Miami, Woodward, Weatherford, Guymon, Guthrie. Larger than Durant and Duncan. All of those cities would be smaller than that.

[7 : 26] Than the prison population in our country. A little over a year ago, we decided at OBU to offer a Bachelor of Arts degree in Christian Studies to inmates in the state of Oklahoma.

128 credit hour degree. Full bachelor's degree. Christian liberal arts core curriculum. Just like they would get on the campus in Shawnee.

Everything taught face-to-face. Complete with the degree comes also the internship. And all these courses are being taught face-to-face at Lexington Correctional Center.

In January of 2020, Dr. Thomas called me into his office. I was vice president at the time. An administration. Had been in administration for 15 years at OBU.

And he said, I want you to pray about something. Well, I've learned through the years that when God asks you to start praying about something through one of his servants, you better get ready.

[8 : 26] Because it's typically nothing that's just easy and slight and small. Usually it's big and it's challenging and it's urgent, right? I want you to pray about something. And I said, okay, I'll pray about it.

And he shared the vision that he and at that time our executive director, Dr. Dilbeck of the Oklahoma Baptist, had beginning this program in prison. God had been doing some marvelous things through similar programs in other states.

And today there are about 22 of these programs across the country in different states. College degrees, Christian degrees, faith-based universities and seminaries offering those degrees inside the prison walls.

I could tell you another whole story about how God worked in my life to bring me to this point. But I'll tell you one. I said, I'll pray about it. And so I finished my day.

After we finished the conversation, I got in the car, got ready to go home to my wife. And I thought about something that literally I had not thought about in probably 40 years. I know I don't look 40.

[9 : 31] I'm well over 40. In over 40 years, back when I was a 20-something-year-old pastor in East Texas, I preached prison revivals. Isn't that amazing?

I preached prison revivals, about seven of them, in the piney woods of East Texas, all up and down the eastern part of Texas. Prison revivals. I loved preaching prison revivals. God blessed in those revivals.

It was so exhilarating. Pastor, it was wonderful. And I literally had not thought about that probably in 40 years. And I thought, wow, God started preparing me in that way.

And then there were so many other ways for this particular moment in time. 172 applications we received from across the state when we put the word out about the program.

For 40 spots. 172 men applied for the program. We went through those programs, through those applications, went through them with the state officials and the Department of Corrections.

[10:34] And I interviewed 65 of them, most of them by Zoom, because it was during COVID, during 2020. Some of them in person, but not most of them. And we selected 40.

An opportunity that came unexpectedly for these men. Granted to them in partnership and under the authority of the state.

This is what Chris says about the application. When he wrote in his application one of the essays, this is what he said. A lot of people have been counting me out my whole life. So even though I know this will not be easy, I look forward to the challenge.

James said this. I'm not sure why I'm applying. I have been praying for my ears to hear. The Lord said all these years I've been listening to lies. Lies from the devil.

And I know the devil is already lost. It's time for me to listen to the truth. Vince wrote in his application, I answered God's call to salvation on February 21st, 2000.

[11:37] From that time on, I've spent the past 20 years of my incarceration sharing the gospel with the men in my community and discipling new believers in Christ. The in-depth Bible education that I can gain through the OBU Prison Divinity Program will give me the knowledge, training, and discipline needed to more effectively reach and disciple men in my community for Christ.

Isn't that fantastic? Reaching the men in my community. My town. This is where God has put me. My community. Reaching them. Discipling them.

And man, they are so excited to be a part of this program. The king expressed kindness to Jehoiakim. And then listen to what he did. It says that he spoke kindly to him.

And right before that, it said he pardoned him and released him from prison. This is a tremendous, colorful phrase in the Hebrew language.

It means literally to lift up. Lift up. In fact, if you read this passage in the King James Version, it says that he lifted up the head of Jehoiakim, king of Judah.

[12:54] Imagine that. Jehoiakim coming in to the king's room. And what does he do? He bows. He kneels, right? In the presence of the king. And the king reaches down, puts his hand under his chin, and lifts his head up.

What a beautiful image that is. Lifts his head up. Let me show you how God writes in his word. It's so special. If this contrasts this with the Jeremiah's prophecy, Jeremiah prophesied in chapter 13 about the downfall of Jerusalem, and Jehoiakim's captivity and his mother, the queen mother's deportation.

And this is what he says in Jeremiah 13, 18. Say to the king and the queen mother, Take a humble seat, for your glorious crowns have fallen from your heads.

Isn't that amazing how God writes in his word? In the prophecy, the crown has fallen from your head, and there is shame, and there is embarrassment.

And yet now this king is lifting his head, and in doing so, restoring his dignity.

[14:07] Restoring his dignity. Can you imagine Jehoiakim walking the streets out of Jerusalem on his way to Babylon?

No great royal procession this time. No great fanfare this time. No regal robes this time.

But walking out with his head hung in shame and embarrassment. And yet this opportunity that has come to him now restores his dignity.

The men that we serve and we teach at Lexington have purpose and focus. They have a mission for life. They have a reason to get up in the morning.

They have a reason to get up in the morning and walk and talk throughout the day. And walk tall throughout the day. They've been given this opportunity.

[15:16] After the first week in class, I asked them, maybe the first couple of weeks, I said, guys, how are we doing? Are you overwhelmed? Are you just wondering, can I do this?

You know? And David responded this way. David, by the way, already has a bachelor's degree from University of Oklahoma in computer science. And he responded this way.

He said, I am absolutely worn out. I am absolutely worn out. Brother Mike, you can relate to that.

All the reading and writing. I am absolutely worn out. But you know what he said? But for the first time in a long, long time, I feel human again. I feel human again.

I'm doing something with my mind. I'm doing something with my heart that makes a difference in life. Jehoiakon's dignity was restored when he lifted up his head.

[16:17] And then notice in verse 28. So then Jehoiakon, after being released, the king spoke kindly to him, said, it's thrown over the thrones of the kings who are in Babylon.

And Jehoiakon, in verse 29, changed his prison clothes. He changed his prison clothes. Laid them aside. Now, I don't know what color or type of clothes that Jehoiakon wore while he was in prison there in Babylon.

But I feel sure that they weren't the bright purples and scarlets and the bright blues of his royal robes. Right?

I'm pretty sure there was nothing that sat on his head. I'm pretty sure he held nothing in his hand resembling the scepter that he carried as a king.

Clothes are often indicative of our identity. Let me illustrate. Because of what he wore as king, people recognized him as king while he was still afar off.

[17:32] They could see him coming. And before they could even make out his face, they knew because of his clothing, he was a king. He was a king. He was somebody important.

He was our king. And then the excitement would follow, right? The king is coming. Boy, they'd all gather around. They knew he was coming because his clothes identified him. Clothes identify our students.

They're orange. And they have inmates stamped on the back of everything they wear. I tease with the guys. I'm a University of Oklahoma fan.

We were season ticket holders for football for 31 years. And I told them, I said, guys, God has a sense of humor. I have to come here every day and look at a sea of orange.

This is more difficult on me than you ever know. You know? And I said, when we know that the prison culture has experienced a change, which is our end goal, that the culture of the system has changed.

[18:38] I said, when we know that the prison culture has changed is when they'll change all of that to crimson. That's when we know it's changed. I don't know if that's really going to happen or not. But you understand what I'm saying?

You're identified by your clothing just as surely as he was identified in his clothing. Then guess what? Our inmates, our students are identified by clothing.

But these men matter. And they matter to God. They've committed crimes. Some of them horrific crimes. Horrific crimes. And yet they still bear the image of God.

Still distorted. Just like it's distorted in me. Just like it's distorted in you. But they still bear the image of God. They remain redeemed by the cross of Christ.

And guess what? They remain created for good works, which beforehand God had purpose for them to do. God has a ministry for these men.

[19:38] A tremendous ministry for these men. And their identity has been redeemed through Jesus Christ. Listen to Eric's words. My life on the other side of these prison walls was more imprisoned and less hopeful than any day on the inside.

When I was at my lowest point in life, Lord, you saw your son. When I decided to come home, you ran to me. You are a good, good father. You cleaned the filth off my life and put new clothes on me. And now in you, Lord, I have dignity, respect, and hope. Thank you. Wow. Let me share with you Lloyd's story.

Lloyd came to me after a few weeks of class. He said, have you got a minute to talk? I said, sure. He said, thank you for calling me by my first name. I said, you're welcome.

He said, the reason I say that, of course, in prison, they're never called by their first name. It's by their last name. And it's not a mister. It's just a, hey, Smith, Jones. Thank you for calling me by your first name.

[20:51] He said, I'm a junior. I'm named after my dad. I'm Lloyd Jr. When my dad left us, when I was seven years old, my name became a cuss word.

My mother never called me by my name ever again. And I've had a nickname all my life. Thank you for calling me by my name.

Seems rather simple, doesn't it? But it reached down deep into his soul and let him know he matters. He matters. Well, Jehoiakim laid aside his prison clothes.

Look there in verse 29. And he dined regularly in the presence of the king of Babylon for the rest of his life. And as for his allowance, a regular allowance was given to him by the king, a portion for each day.

For the rest of his life. This was an experience that transformed him for the rest of his life.

[22 : 04] Changed his manner of living for the rest of his life. Changed his destiny for the rest of his life. Now, it's likely that both phrases, he dined regularly in the presence of the king, and for his allowance, a regular allowance was given to him by the king, a portion for each day.

It's likely that both phrases refer to the same thing. Both of them refer to the food that the king was providing him. And obviously, it was going to be a different nature than the food he had enjoyed inside his prison cell day after day for 36 plus years, right?

And so it refers to the nature of the food. But the phrases are used independently and yet together because they describe this food in a little different way. The first phrase, he dined regularly in the presence of the king, emphasizes Jehoiakon's fellowship with the king.

He dined regularly in the presence of the king. The king not only provided food for him, but he said, Hey, let's eat it together at my table.

Let's eat it together at my table. And he was invited to eat at the king's table now every day for the rest of his life. One of the objectives, in fact, the primary objective in the prison divinity program is to help these men, number one, come to faith in Christ.

[23 : 35] And by the way, we had the opportunity to baptize one of our students just last Friday. We've had seven men across the yard saved in the last three or four months.

A couple of gang leaders, by the way. But one of the objectives is to help them understand how to come to Jesus as Savior and Lord and to develop an intimate, daily, victorious relationship with him in the process.

Live in a deep relationship with God. Every semester, they take a discipleship course. That's how we handle the electives, the elective requirements.

Every semester, a discipleship course. They're required, as a manner of class, keep a spiritual journal every day, which I take up once a week in review.

Memorize scripture every week. Read through a reading plan. A 365-day-a-year reading plan to read through the entire Bible every year.

[24 : 35] They're required to do that. Can I meddle just for a moment? How many of us are doing that?

Journaling our experience with God every day. Telling our story of the journey with God every day. Memorizing scripture on a weekly basis. Reading through the Bible every year. Developing an intimate relationship with God that feeds their daily life.

That heightens their awareness of God's activity around them. One of the things that happened back in May is our unit where we're located, where our classroom and our men live.

And there are four different living areas, pods, they call them, within that unit. And back in May, the warden decided to move all of the gang leaders, all of the prison gang leaders, down to our unit into one of the living pods.

[25 : 54] I stood up and told our guys in class the week that happened. I said, do you think that it's a coincidence that God has brought the gang leaders to live across the sidewalk from you guys?

No, sir. Well, why do you suppose that happened? Because God's brought the mission field right to us. Right to us.

We've seen two of them come to Christ thus far. Fellowship with the king. See what God is doing.

Put your boat in the river where he's working. Set sail with him. Wow. And the second phrase in verse 30, that his allowance was given to him a portion for each day, still refers to the same food.

But this time, it's not the fellowship with the king that is emphasized, eating at the table with the king. It is the faithfulness of the king that is emphasized.

[27 : 12] It was given to him a portion for each day. Every day, just like clockwork, the king provided the food. The faithfulness of the king.

The food kept coming. The food kept coming. The objective of this program is to teach these men, like we teach students in Shawnee, live all of life for all of Jesus.

Live all of life, all for Jesus. And so we're trying to teach them not only what they need to understand academically for their degree, not only what they need to understand spiritually to increase their spiritual health and deepen their relationship with God, but strengthen their capacity and their ability to serve.

Teach them how, why they serve their fellow inmates. Studies show that inmates who participate in some type of education beyond high school are 43% less likely to return to prison when they're released than those who do not.

Even if we weren't teaching them scripturally, even if we weren't deepening their walk spiritually, there is value just in the academic education. I like that statistic.

[28 : 34] Some of these men will be released at some point. A little over half of them are lifers, probably will never be released. But some of these men will be released at some point. I like the idea that because of what we're doing, there is going to be a 40 to 50% chance that they'll stay out, more so than the ones who haven't done anything while they're in prison.

I think it's going to be much, much higher for our guys. This opportunity has been life-changing for them and life-changing for Jehoiakon. Listen to Jared's testimony.

This is beyond anything I could ever ask for. I never want to walk alone or depart from your presence, O God. I long to know the depths of your heart and what you would have me do.

I realize apart from you I can accomplish nothing and living is in vain. You gifted me with this life and I shall live it unto you. This day is beautiful, not only from what I see and feel, but because of what I know and who you are.

I love you, Father. You're the best. That comes from his journal. We distribute an e-newsletter, and some of them can be mailed if folks don't have internet access, every month.

[29 : 48] And I pull excerpts from their journals and publish those in a section called Pen from Prison as they share what God is doing in their life. Man.

And let me tell you, for those of you who might say, well, it's just jailhouse religion. Let me enlighten you. There is no advantage to claiming Jesus in prison. In fact, it is a disadvantage to claim Jesus in prison.

It makes it harder, not easier. And let me also let you know this. In our arrangement with the Department of Corrections, we state in our Memorandum of Understanding, the document that governs our relationship, that our president signed off on, and Director Crowe from the Department of Corrections signed off on.

And it says that none of the things that they're studying in our class, in our program, the diploma that they receive, none of that can be included in their file if it goes before a parole board.

And we wanted it that way. We want them to do this, not with thinking, well, if I do this, it'll look better for me when I stand before the parole board. Well, guess what? None of this goes in your jacket, as they call it.

[31 : 04] None of this goes in your file. A parole board would never see any of this. So that's not the reason to do it. Robert said about his experience, he writes this in his journal, I was kind of sad as I sat and the sun rose this morning waiting to go eat breakfast.

This is part of my quiet time with God. I close my eyes sometimes and it doesn't feel like I'm in prison. Even after the quiet leaves and when it gets loud around me, he is louder in me.

I close my eyes and I don't feel these years. I don't feel the pain. Sometimes I look up and even with my eyes closed, I see his light. I'm thankful that I'm learning about God, Jesus, and my faith.

I feel free inside my heart. Man, it blesses me. It blesses me. Well, there's one more thing I want you to notice in this passage.

And it's something that's not written in the passage. It's an aspect that Bible scholars agree is a major teaching from this passage, even though it does not appear in the text.

[32 : 14] Let me explain. There were thousands of Jehoiakins people, his former subjects, who lived with him in exile.

Some of them would never see Jerusalem again. Some of them had never seen Jerusalem. They had been born while in exile. They'd heard stories from their parents and their grandparents about the temple and its majestic appearance and the importance of Jerusalem and worshipping God in that temple, but they'd never seen it.

They'd never been there. There was always within the people a desire. I hope we can get to go back someday.

I hope we can return someday. The younger generation. Boy, I'd like to see what grandma and grandpa talked about with my own eyes.

day after day, just like Jehoiakins' existence inside the prison, their existence outside the prison was pretty much the same.

[33 : 24] Nothing much changed. But now listen. His release. Can you imagine?

Down at the marketplace? Hey, did you hear what happened yesterday? What? The king pardoned Jehoiakins. No way!

Yeah! Yeah! The king pardoned Jehoiakins. You gotta be kidding me. Hey, did you hear what happened down at the prison yesterday? Jehoiakins got released.

Hey, you know what I heard in the marketplace? Jehoiakins got released. You're kidding me. No, and not only did he get released, I heard that he's eating at the king's table.

You're kidding. No, he's doing that. And can you imagine that spreading out all over the marketplace and in the community among God's people, among the Hebrews? Jehoiakins got released.

[34 : 26] Jehoiakins got released. That he was finally released from prison, J.A. Thompson says in his commentary on this passage, that he was finally released from prison may have seemed like the first signs of the fulfillment of Jeremiah's promises that a day of restoration would come.

Oh, if Jehoiakins got released, maybe we're going to get to go back to Jerusalem. If Jehoiakins got released, maybe the king's going to let us all go back, let us all go to Jerusalem.

Maybe we will get to see what grandma and grandpa talked about. You see, his experience extended hope throughout the community.

extended hope throughout the community. His experience. You know what the end goal of the prison divinity program is for Oklahoma Baptist?

This is the end goal. Not just that men would come to faith in Christ and their lives be eternally changed, but that through them, their families would be reached.

[35 : 38] And through them, the communities in which their families live would be impacted. And that the yards of the prison would be impacted.

And ultimately, this is what we're praying for. God changed the entire prison culture of our state. The entire culture of our state. In a good way, we're praying for the unemployment rate to rise among prison officials.

Just wouldn't need them. So that's crazy to think that. Oh, God's done that before. God's done that before. You read of some great awakenings in the United States. There was a time, Pastor Mark, Mike, you believe, you remember this.

There were times when half the police force in New York City was let go because there wasn't any crime. God had moved so mightily in the community. Why can't he do that inside a prison?

Why can't he? And that's happening in prisons all across the country. These graduates, armed with a college degree, internships the last two years, their junior and senior year with the prison chaplain, when they are finished with this degree and have their degree and their internship, guess what?

[36 : 55] The Department of Corrections has already agreed and put it in writing. They will be called field ministers. Their ID badge will say field ministers.

And they will be transferred from Lexington in teams of three and four to the rest of the prisons in our state to minister. I'm telling you what, Director Crowe is a smart man.

But when he signed that MOU, he had no idea what he's getting ready to turn loose on the system in Oklahoma. We're raising up our own missionaries to the prison culture in Oklahoma.

Man, that's exciting. Let me share this one other story from Lloyd again, as he wrote in his journal, as we bring things to a close. He writes this, Yesterday, I put on a brand new pair of socks.

When I took them off to hand wash them today, I gave extra special care to clean them because they are new. With an old pair of socks, it's not as important to me that they look brand new because they're already old and used.

[38 : 02] But imagine if I could treat my soul every day like a brand new pair of socks. Wash it very thoroughly to make sure it stays extremely clean and still looks new.

Wash it in the Word, deep cleaning, to keep from becoming stained and used. to be untarnished as if brand new in the sight of God.

Every day giving it the same care and attention so that it does not become old or soiled. God, help me remember and learn new ways to guard my soul to keep it holy.

And to remember where my feet go, so does my soul. That will preach from any pulpit in the planet, won't it?

Keep my soul clean, oh God. And remember that where my feet go, so does my soul. I want to tell you, my friends, God is moving through these men to make a tremendous difference in the lives of men that they know, in the lives of their family.

[39 : 20] And we believe He's going to be using them to do as it was said of the apostles, to turn the world upside down.

Now I prayed this morning before I came to preach. And this is what I prayed, Almighty God, may the impact of what you say move from our heads to our hearts to our hands.

And let our response be one that extends beyond affirmation to action. So why do I share this with you this morning? Well, two or three reasons. One, I want you to know what you're doing.

You're helping. And I want you to pray for us. And if you're interested in more information, my wife's the keeper of the information. She can give you more information. If you want to get on our newsletter list, she can tell you how to do that.

She can pray for these men. Hear what God's doing in their lives. But I share with you for another reason too. Because you know, there's some of us that yesterday looks like today.

[40 : 27] And today looks like the day before that. And we have no reason that tomorrow will look any different. We may not be behind concertina wire and gates and brick walls, but we're in prison.

We're in prison. Whatever it is has robbed us of our joy. Maybe even robbed us of our dignity.

And like Jehoiakim, we feel shame. And we feel embarrassment over our condition. Maybe we've even lost our identity.

We're not even sure who we are anymore. Sometimes that can be good things that imprison us. We spent so much time and effort trying to maintain the appearance, the facade, that everything is alright.

But inside, we know it's really not. It's really not. I'm here to tell you not only about the Prison Divinity Program.

[41 : 57] I'm here to tell you that God is knocking on your door. And He's saying to you this morning, it can be different.

It can be different. If you will come to Me, I will feed you with the riches of My table. I will have fellowship with you.

I will faithfully attend to your needs. I will pardon you and release you from your bondage. And you can lay aside your prison clothes.

I don't know you. You don't know me. But you know what? The Holy Spirit of God knows every one of us. And I want to challenge you with all that is within me this morning.

That if this resonates within your heart and within your thinking, and you're thinking, that is me. Oh, my friend, this morning, lay aside your prison garments.

[43 : 10] Let Jesus set you free. Let God release you from your bondage. Come to Him when He knocks.

I remember as a nine-year-old boy sitting in a pew. It was around about this area in Bethel Baptist Church in Frederick, Oklahoma, Tillman County. And I knew that I needed to give my life to Jesus. I knew it. And I would stand there and sing just as I am and I would hold on to that pew until my knuckles were white. And I would think, if I can just last through verse six, I'll be able to go home and eat lunch.

And you know what? That worked for a while. My heart would beat so fast. That thought of giving my life to Christ would just go over and over and over and over in my mind.

And that worked for a while. I'd outlast to Him. Hear the amen. Go home, eat lunch, and be on my way. But you know what started happening? This is what started happening.

[44 : 11] I'd go home, but I'd still be thinking about that on Sunday afternoon. I needed to give my life to Jesus. I needed to get myself right with God.

And then money would come and I'd go into school and forget about it. But you know what happened? Then I'd go home and I'd think about it on Sunday afternoon. And I'd still be thinking about it on Monday and on Wednesday and on Friday.

It was like God loved me so much He would not let me escape the call on my life to give my life to Jesus. Maybe that's where you are.

And if this morning you're determining if I can just get out of here it'll be okay. I'll tell you from own experience. It will for a minute or two. But God loves you so much you're not going to get away from it.

He's not willing to let you self-destruct. I wish you could hear the testimony of so many of the students in the program. So many of them say thank God I'm in prison.

[45 : 28] Thank God I'm in prison. And so many of them trying to explain to their children I'm better in prison than I was out there. And why would they say that?

Here's why. If God had not permitted me to be arrested I would be dead by now. I would have killed myself.

I would have overdosed on drugs. I'd have been killed in an armed robbery. I'd been dead by now. Thank God I'm in prison. He finally got my attention. And this is where I found Jesus.

Thank God for that. And I'm not saying you're going to wind up in prison. But I will say this. God will continue to come after you and after you and after you and after you. So why not just give up the struggle this morning and say God I'm coming to you.

I've never given my life to Jesus Christ but today I'm going to do that. Pastor Mike will be down here at the front. He'll gladly receive you with open arms. And you just come and tell him Pastor I need to give my life to Jesus.

[46 : 36] I need to give my life to Jesus. You may be a believer but something is holding you just as surely as shackles were on your feet. You can't enjoy life because of that burdensome burden that's on your life right now.

I just need to come to the altar and pray and say Lord I'm going to give this thing to you this morning. I've tried to fix it. I've tried to make it better. I've tried to be strong enough persistent enough stubborn enough and nothing's working.

I'm just going to ask you please change my life. Please change my life. Would you do that? I want you to stand with me and I want to pray for you right now that we will do business with God.

You know when we come to church we enjoy the wonderful music and we enjoy the enriching fellowship but the reason God has brought you here this morning is for you to do business with Him. And all of that comes to focus right now. To do business with God. Whenever we encounter the Word of God whether it's in preaching or Bible study or Sunday school or in the devotional or our kitchen table whenever we come encountering the Word of God we ask ourselves two questions.

[47 : 43] One is is it true? And if it is what does it have to do with me? So that's the question I put before you this morning. Is it true? What does it have to do with me? Let's do business with God.

Father God we pray this morning that in these moments Your Holy Spirit will move upon our hearts and it will translate to our hands and our feet and our mouths that we would confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior and that as believers we would give our lives anew and afresh completely to You.

I pray especially for those who may be in bondage this morning and nobody may know it they suffer quietly and silently but Lord I pray that You minister into their suffering this morning into their loneliness into their pain into their sorrow into their confusion and You would bring freedom to them release them from that bondage set them free may this be the day they lay aside those prison clothes and walk up taller than they came in in Jesus name we pray Amen Amen