It's Changed What I'm Living For

Exploring Narratives of Human Flourishing from Inside America's Prisons

By

Robin LaBarbera

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Author's Note

For privacy and ethical reasons, the names of some individuals in this book have been changed. In every case, their stories, words, and experiences are drawn directly from interviews and research conducted for this study.

Foreword

In every era, God calls His people to enter the broken places of the world and bring His presence there. Few places seem more forgotten, more filled with despair, than our prisons. Yet, it is precisely in these spaces—behind bars, outside the reach of most ministries—that grace often shines the brightest. This book reminds us that the gospel is not limited by walls and that the love of Christ can redeem what society considers irredeemable.

I have witnessed the transforming power of God in the lives of men and women who once believed their stories were finished. When faith enters a prison cell, everything changes. The chains of guilt give way to forgiveness. The weight of shame lifts under mercy's touch. What was once a place of punishment becomes a place of purpose. This book captures that redemptive movement with clarity and compassion. It helps us see prison ministry not just as an outreach to the incarcerated but as a mirror of God's own heart, which is a heart that runs toward the prodigal and restores what is lost.

Dr. Robin LaBarbara writes from years of dedicated service in ministry. Honest conversations and genuine transformation shape her research. The wisdom here comes from walking the tiers, sitting across from inmates, and witnessing firsthand how the Holy Spirit rebuilds what broken systems cannot. Every page reflects a commitment to the belief that the gospel still holds the power to set captives free spiritually, emotionally, and socially.

What makes this book unique is its focus on redemptive rehabilitation. It doesn't stop at moral reform or social reintegration. It goes deeper, to the core level where identity and hope are renewed. The author reminds us that true rehabilitation starts not with policy but with presence. It begins when someone looks an inmate in the eye and says, "You are not forgotten. You are loved. God still has a plan for you." From that moment, a new life can begin. Her book bridges theology and practice, connecting the Great Commission with the great need inside our correctional institutions.

Whether you are a pastor, social worker, community leader, or volunteer, you will find wisdom here that extends beyond prison walls. The lessons of transformation—humility, perseverance, faith in the face of resistance—are the same lessons we all need in the pursuit of Christlike love.

As I read these pages, I felt both challenged and inspired. Challenged because it confronts how easily we forget those who are out of sight; inspired because it shows what can happen when the Church remembers. When we take Jesus' call to visit the prisoner seriously, we find not only their healing but ours as well. The work of redemption always transforms both the giver and the receiver. That is the mystery of grace as it flows in both directions.

If you've ever wondered whether change can happen in the hardest places, this book will restore your hope. It truthfully addresses pain, failure, and injustice, but it doesn't end there. It guides us toward the more profound truth that resurrection is still possible, that no story is beyond God's power to rewrite. Dr.

LaBarbera's words are realistic, yet also infused with resurrection faith.

I encourage you to let this book's insights expand your view of what ministry can be. Allow its stories to remind you that God's kingdom progresses not through comfort, but through courage. And let it inspire you to join the movement of redemption taking place in prisons, halfway houses, and communities worldwide.

I recommend this book to you with sincere gratitude and conviction. It serves as a guide for anyone who believes that transformation is more powerful than punishment, that grace is stronger than guilt, and that light still shines in the darkest places. May it awaken in you the same faith that has inspired generations of people who dared to believe that even behind prison walls, the Spirit of the Lord is at work bringing good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, and restoration to all who accept it. May the message of this book transfer from these pages into our hearts, and from our hearts into the world.

Rev. Dr. Alvin Sanders
President & CEO of World Impact

Preface

The prophet Ezekiel knew what it meant to stand in a place of desolation. In the thirty-seventh chapter of his book, he describes being carried by the Spirit of the Lord into a valley. It was not a valley of vineyards or wildflowers, but a graveyard without graves, a plain littered with bones. Dry bones. Brittle, lifeless, long abandoned. God asked him a question that reverberates across the centuries: "Son of man, can these bones live?"

Ezekiel did not presume to know the answer. "Sovereign Lord," he replied, "you alone know." Then, at God's command, he began to speak. He prophesied to the bones, and a sound filled the valley, a rattling, the noise of bones reconnecting, flesh covering, breath returning. Life, where there had only been death.

That vision has haunted and sustained me because I, too, have known what it feels like to live among dry bones. My own childhood carried a great deal of adversity. Instability, loss, and wounds that burrowed deep shaped the early years of my life. Statistically, I was not supposed to flourish. I was not supposed to rise. Like Ezekiel, I once looked over a valley of brokenness—my own—and wondered if anything whole could ever come from it.

Yet by God's grace, those bones lived. Slowly, through faith, education, mentors, and opportunities I never imagined, breath came where there had been none. My life became a testimony that the valley is not the end of the story.

Years later, my vocation as a researcher and evaluator of social impact led me to an unexpected place: the prison classroom. Inmates are not so different from Ezekiel's bones. They are discarded, written off, presumed lifeless by the world around them. When a young man is sentenced to decades, society often closes the book. He will not change, we tell ourselves. She will never recover. They will always be dangerous.

But I have learned to resist such easy conclusions.

I remember one man, once a gang leader, who told me that when he first entered solitary confinement, he believed he would die there. His heart was hard, his mind full of rage. Years later, after encountering faith and beginning seminary-level theological study, he described himself in a very different way: "I used to be bones," he said. "Now I am alive." He was mentoring younger men, teaching Scripture, and bringing peace to a place known for violence.

Another man, incarcerated since he was seventeen, told me that for most of his life he believed his only identity was that of a murderer. "That's what the world called me," he explained. "That's what I called myself." It was not until he studied theology in prison that he began to imagine a new name, a new self. Today, he serves as a pastor to fellow inmates, counseling them through grief, pointing them toward forgiveness, and dreaming of the day he might serve others in ministry in the free world.

Stories like these stirred my curiosity not only as a person of faith but also as a researcher. Could transformation like this be measured? Could it be understood through the lenses of human

flourishing, well-being, and identity development? I set out to answer those questions with the tools of evaluation—mixed-methods research that combined surveys, interviews, and thematic analysis.

Together with a team, I studied over 250 men and women who participated in seminary-level theological training behind bars. The evidence was striking: participants reported significant growth in hope, resilience, purpose, and meaningful relationships. Survey results showed measurable gains in domains of flourishing—spiritual life, character, community, and meaning. Interviews provided vivid accounts of men and women who were once hardened by crime but were now mentoring, teaching, and serving others. In research language, the data confirmed what the stories had already proclaimed: dry bones were living again.

I did not write this book only as a researcher. I wrote it as a witness. I have heard bones rattle in prison chapels when men who once bowed only to violence now bow in prayer. I have seen them come together in classrooms where thick textbooks are worn thin from study. I have felt the Spirit's breath in conversations where shame gives way to joy.

This book is not naïve. It does not deny the pain of victims or the seriousness of crime. It does not suggest that education alone erases the past. But it does insist that the valley is not the end of the story. Life is possible, even in prison. Flourishing can emerge in the most unlikely of places.

Ezekiel's vision was not about bones alone. It was about a people who thought their hope was gone, who cried, "Our bones are dried

up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." God's reply was not condemnation but promise: "I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live."

That is the heartbeat of this book. My own story testifies to it. The men and women whose voices you will hear in these pages embody it. This is not merely a book of theory, nor is it a book of sentiment. It is research grounded in evidence, braided together with stories of transformation. And it is, at its core, a testimony that dry bones still live.

As you turn these pages, I invite you to listen, both to the data and to the stories. Approach with questions, with skepticism if you must, but also with the openness of Ezekiel's answer: "Sovereign Lord, you alone know."

Because I have seen it. I have seen dry bones live again. I have seen, first hand, what God can do in the most unlikely places.

And it has changed what I am living for.

Introduction

The classroom was bright with fluorescent light, its cinderblock walls covered in hand-drawn charts, motivational phrases, and taped-up study notes. Plastic tables, marked with years of use, formed a rough horseshoe so every man could see the others' faces. A few had their heads bent over notebooks. Others leaned forward, hands clasped, listening. The room was quiet except for the low hum of the air vent. Through the reinforced glass, it could have been mistaken for a community meeting—until the white prison uniforms, identification badges, and uniformed officers reminded you where it was.

In the far corner, Dominic Marino sat with a Bible and a stack of course materials in front of him. He underlined a verse in the Gospel of John and made a note in the margin. Around the tables, men of different ages and backgrounds—Black, white, and Latino—studied the same text. The seating arrangement left no room to disappear into the background. Each man was both a participant and a witness to the work of the others.

Marino had not always been the kind of man who spent his mornings in a classroom. At seventeen, he was convicted for his role in a brutal, hate-driven murder that left a young man dead and a community scarred. In the early years of his sentence, he avoided programs, kept to himself, and let the decades pass. Then came the craft shop, where leatherwork taught him patience and precision. Scripture reading followed. Eventually, he enrolled in The Urban Ministry Institute, a seminary-level theological program for incarcerated students. The coursework was

demanding, with modules on theology, ethics, church history, and ministry leadership. For Marino, it became the framework for reshaping his identity.

In February 2024, after thirty years in prison, he stood before the Texas parole board. His file contained a spotless disciplinary record, degrees earned behind bars, and letters from chaplains, corrections officers, and men he had mentored. The board denied his release, citing the nature of the original crime.

Marino's journey is one of many in this book. Across the United States, incarcerated men and women have undergone deep personal change, often rooted in faith, education, and service, yet find that transformation alone does not guarantee a second chance. This book examines how that change happens, what sustains it, and why it matters. It begins by laying the theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding transformation in prison, exploring how identity, moral character, and human flourishing can develop even in an environment designed for punishment. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature and a multi-year mixed-methods study of The Urban Ministry Institute, the opening chapters trace the role of faith, education, and community in supporting meaningful change.

From there, the focus shifts to the voices of those living it. Seven narrative portraits offer a closer look at the daily realities of transformation behind bars—how theological study becomes a relational ecosystem where peers, mentors, and facilitators challenge and encourage one another, where identity is rebuilt, and where accountability and healing take root.

The final chapters reflect on the broader implications. They consider what it means to center human flourishing, rather than a reduction in recidivism alone, as a goal for correctional programming. They explore how faith-based education can prepare incarcerated individuals to return to their communities not only with new skills, but with a renewed sense of purpose, belonging, and moral responsibility.

Although this study evaluates a specific program, its deeper aim is to illuminate the humanity and potential of people too often dismissed by society. The men you will meet here are not defined solely by the crimes of their past, but by the transformations they are living out in the present. Their stories testify to the power of hope, the necessity of community, and the possibility of redemption, even in the most unlikely places. As one of them said in his own words, programs like The Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI) have truly "changed what I'm living for."

Part I: The Framework of Change

This book begins with a question that challenges conventional thinking about incarceration: Can human flourishing take root in a setting designed for control, isolation, and punishment? More specifically, can rigorous theological education—grounded in spiritual formation and relational accountability—contribute to identity transformation in men serving long-term prison sentences?

Part I provides the foundation for exploring these questions. It introduces the broader social and institutional context of mass incarceration in the United States, the nature and structure of the prison-based theological education program at the center of this study, and the theoretical frameworks that inform the research. Drawing on perspectives from identity theory, desistance literature, theological anthropology, and the psychology of moral development, these chapters examine how relationally grounded education can foster growth in purpose, character, and social connectedness behind bars.

This section also outlines the study's mixed-methods research design, including survey data and in-depth qualitative interviews with incarcerated men who participated in the program. Attention is given to ethical considerations, methodological limitations, and the interpretive approach used to understand both individual transformation and the broader impact of the program.

Together, these chapters situate the research within a growing body of work on prison education and rehabilitation, while

emphasizing a distinct contribution: the central role of positive social relationships—formed through theological study and spiritual community—in shaping human flourishing in carceral spaces.

Chapter 1
Prison, Punishment, and Possibility

Prison is not commonly imagined as a place where human flourishing occurs. Designed to control, isolate, and punish, the modern carceral system in the United States often suppresses the very conditions that support personal growth—trust, community, purpose, and hope. Yet within these highly restrictive environments, individuals still wrestle with questions of meaning, identity, and moral responsibility. Some experience profound transformations, despite the structural constraints around them.

This chapter situates the study within the broader context of mass incarceration, examining how the U.S. prison system has evolved over the past several decades to how it functions today. It explores the psychological costs of confinement and how carceral conditions often impede the very transformation that many correctional systems claim to support. This context is essential for understanding the significance of programs that seek to cultivate growth, moral development, and relational trust within prison walls.

Emerging within this situation are programs that take a more holistic approach to formation and rehabilitation. Theological education is one example which engages participants not only as learners but as moral agents, community members, and spiritual beings. This book explores one such program, focusing on the experiences of men serving long-term or life sentences who participated in seminary-level education while incarcerated. Their

stories reveal how transformation often occurs through relationships—mentorship, peer accountability, shared study—and how these connections foster a sense of dignity, purpose, and agency.

In tracing the potential for human flourishing behind bars, this chapter opens a conversation about what rehabilitation could mean if it were re-imagined not simply as behavior control, but as moral and relational development. The chapters that follow build on this premise, examining how one form of theological education makes space for identity transformation even in the most unlikely of places.

The Recidivism Crisis

Recidivism, or when someone falls back into criminal behavior after already having been in trouble with the law, is one of the biggest challenges in our criminal justice system. According to the National Institute of Justice, this can mean anything from getting arrested again, to breaking the rules of parole or probation, or even being sent back to prison for a new conviction.

Unfortunately, recidivism rates in the United States have remained stubbornly high for years. As a result, people working for criminal justice reform are searching for better ways to help formerly incarcerated individuals get back on their feet. One of the main reasons people end up back in the system is that they do not have enough support or access to resources that could help them successfully rejoin their communities. As Nellis (2021) points out, people who are released after long sentences often face huge challenges—psychological, financial, and job-related—that make

it hard to stay out of trouble, even if they aren't at high risk of committing another crime.

Finding a job is especially tough for people coming out of prison, but it is absolutely crucial. Employment opens the door to basics like food, housing, and clothing. Yet, the numbers are staggering: formerly incarcerated people face an unemployment rate of over 27 percent, which is even higher than what the country experienced during the Great Depression (Kopf & Couloute, 2018). Without stable work and support, it is no wonder so many people struggle to break the cycle.

The Scale and Cost of Failure

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. As Widra and Herring (2021) point out, every state in the U.S. locks up more people per capita than almost any other democracy. Despite the enormous scale of imprisonment, our correctional system has consistently fallen short of its goal to rehabilitate.

Decades of research shows that incarceration, as it exists today, does little to reduce repeat offenses. For many, prison is an environment filled with isolation and despair, which can take a serious toll on their mental health. The lack of meaningful programs for personal growth inside prisons makes it even harder for people to break the cycle of crime. As Cullen, Jonson, and Nagin (2011) note, simply serving time without real support or intervention rarely helps prevent future offenses.

Recidivism—when someone who has already been convicted of a crime commits another—remains a major problem in the United States. National statistics show that about two-thirds of people

released from prison are re-arrested within three years, and more than eight out of ten are re-arrested within ten years (Antenangeli & Durose, 2021). This revolving door keeps the criminal justice system crowded and overburdened.

At any moment, roughly 2.2 million people are behind bars in the United States. More than 95% of them will eventually return to their communities. Each year, over 626,000 people are released from state and federal prisons, and more than 11 million cycle through local jails. Yet, re-entry is full of obstacles, and as Cullen et al. (2011) observe, many leave prison with an even greater risk of re-offending.

The financial cost of this system is staggering. The U.S. spends about $80.7 billion each year on public prisons and jails, plus another $3.9 billion on private facilities (Prison Policy Initiative, 2023). Despite this massive investment, high recidivism rates persist—leading to more crime, more victims, and ongoing harm to individuals, families, and communities.

These realities force us to ask: Is there a better way? More and more evidence suggests that lasting public safety depends not on harsher punishment, but on investing in programs that tackle the root causes of crime and support true personal growth.

The Psychological Costs of Confinement

Despite growing interest in rehabilitation and personal development within correctional systems, the broader psychological effects of incarceration remain deeply troubling. While some individuals experience growth and increased well-being through targeted interventions, such as educational or faith-

based programs, the prevailing conditions of prison life are often incompatible with human flourishing.

This section reviews empirical research on the psychological consequences of incarceration, with particular attention to how environmental stressors, trauma, and institutional structures contribute to mental health challenges and identity disruption. Drawing from existing literature and firsthand accounts from study participants, the discussion highlights how the prison environment can erode a person's sense of agency, autonomy, and self-worth, creating long-term barriers to reintegration and relational stability.

While some incarcerated individuals achieve personal growth and psychological well-being through intentional interventions and educational opportunities, the broader prison environment remains fundamentally inhospitable to human flourishing. A large body of empirical literature has documented the detrimental psychological effects of incarceration, including chronic stress, emotional dysregulation, trauma, and identity disruption. These adverse experiences are often compounded by structural factors such as overcrowding, lack of autonomy, and exposure to violence—conditions that present serious obstacles to post-release adjustment and reintegration.

Institutional Conditions and Mental Health

Incarcerated individuals consistently report lower levels of psychological well-being than the general population, and they experience elevated risks of suicide, self-harm, and mental illness (Jang et al., 2021; Kypriandes & Easterbrook, 2019; Lo et al., 2020; Rosenfeld & Grigg, 2022; Wallace & Wang, 2020). Researchers

attribute this disparity to the profoundly restrictive and often punitive nature of the prison environment, where individuals are subject to near-constant surveillance, limited privacy, and monotonous routines. These conditions foster learned helplessness, emotional numbing, and a diminished sense of agency (Haney, 2001; Morin, 2022).

Overcrowding exacerbates these psychological stressors. It restricts access to rehabilitative programming, heightens interpersonal conflict, and increases the likelihood of witnessing or experiencing violence—factors that are directly associated with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Edgemon & Clay-Warner, 2019; Quandt & Jones, 2021). Furthermore, incarceration often entails the erosion of autonomy, as individuals relinquish control over even the most basic decisions related to food, hygiene, and daily routine. This forced dependency contributes to institutionalization, whereby individuals lose the capacity to make independent choices and experience a diminished sense of self-worth (Haney, 2001; Quandt & Jones, 2021).

Trauma and Post-Incarceration Syndrome

The prison environment is not only psychologically restrictive but also, for many, psychologically traumatic. Incarcerated individuals are frequently exposed to violence, both as witnesses and victims, and they often live in a state of hypervigilance to protect themselves from perceived threats. As Haney (2001) notes, this constant alertness fosters interpersonal mistrust and can result in emotional withdrawal or aggression. The cumulative effect of such exposure can lead to trauma-related symptoms that persist

long after release—sometimes conceptualized as Post-Incarceration Syndrome (Bruno, 2019; Quandt & Jones, 2021).

Individuals who have experienced significant trauma prior to incarceration may be especially vulnerable to re-traumatization in the carceral setting. A lack of therapeutic support or meaningful activity further exacerbates symptoms of anxiety, depression, and hopelessness, impeding personal development and rehabilitation (Eytan, 2011; Morin, 2022). Formerly incarcerated individuals frequently describe challenges related to decision-making, emotional regulation, and reintegration into relational and vocational roles—difficulties often rooted in the psychological toll of long-term confinement.

Identity Disruption and Loss of Meaning

Beyond the immediate mental health effects, incarceration disrupts the development and continuity of personal identity. Haney (2001) argued that the dehumanizing conditions of prison life—including rigid schedules, limited personal space, and stigmatized social roles—can lead individuals to experience a diminished sense of meaning and purpose. In the absence of opportunities for productive engagement, boredom and psychological stagnation are common, often giving rise to frustration, anger, and the adoption of maladaptive coping mechanisms (Quandt & Jones, 2021).

In interviews conducted for this study, several participants expressed fear not of continued incarceration but of the unknowns associated with release. One man, incarcerated since age 17, described the anxiety of choosing between dozens of toothpaste brands—a task that underscored how removed he had become

from everyday decision-making. Another described concerns about unintentionally lashing out if touched in his sleep, a reflex shaped by years of hypervigilance inside prison. These narratives illustrate how institutional living reshapes cognition, behavior, and identity in ways that often persist long after release.

Is There a Better Way?

While the carceral environment often undermines psychological well-being and disrupts identity development, incarceration is not universally or inevitably dehumanizing. Within even the most restrictive settings, opportunities for growth and transformation can emerge, particularly when individuals are offered meaningful interventions that affirm their agency, foster reflection, and create space for relational connection.

This section examines evidence-based interventions that promote flourishing among incarcerated individuals, despite the structural and psychological challenges inherent to prison life. These approaches, ranging from academic and vocational education to faith-based formation and psychosocial support, are grounded in the understanding that human beings can change, especially when given the tools and relational context to do so.

What distinguishes these interventions is not only their content, but their impact on how individuals see themselves and relate to others. Programs that promote cognitive engagement, moral development, and emotional resilience do more than reduce recidivism; they cultivate the internal resources needed for meaning-making, ethical decision-making, and relational restoration. The following sections highlight several categories of

interventions, with particular attention on their effects on identity, psychological health, and long-term flourishing.

Educational Opportunities

Educational programming is one of the most well documented and effective interventions available to individuals in correctional settings. Participation in educational programs is associated with significant reductions in recidivism, improved employment outcomes, and enhanced cognitive and emotional functioning (Bozick et al., 2018; Esperian, 2010; Nally et al., 2012). RAND Corporation researchers found that incarcerated individuals who engage in educational programs are 43% less likely to return to prison compared to those who do not (Davis et al., 2014). These programs foster cognitive engagement, improve self-efficacy, and restore a sense of agency—key ingredients for psychological resilience and flourishing.

Moreover, correctional education generates considerable economic benefits. A RAND cost-benefit analysis demonstrated that every dollar invested in prison education results in four to five dollars of reduced costs by reducing future incarceration (Davis et al., 2014). These findings support the expansion of prison education not only as a rehabilitative tool but as a fiscally responsible public policy measure.

Faith-Based Educational Programs

Faith-based education programs in prisons, such as The Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI), add a unique spiritual and moral dimension to traditional educational interventions. Rooted in theological instruction and spiritual formation, these programs