

**Jay Harvey:** Hello, and welcome to the "Free in My Faith" podcast. It is the Prison Ministry podcast of Nick Vujicic Ministries.

[Jay Harvey]

[Director of Prison Ministry for NickV Ministries]

We hope that this blesses you, encourages you, and gives you hope.

[Free in My Faith Podcast]

[Hosted by Jay Harvey]

[NickV Ministries]

[Our guest today: SHAWN O'CONNOR]

**Jay:** Hey everybody, Jay Harvey again, Director of Prison Ministry for Life Without Limbs and the ministry of Nick Vujicic. Episode four of our prison ministry podcast, titled "Free in My Faith," is kind of based on what we take into prisons—the curriculum and some of the things that we do—but excited today that you are watching or listening because we have Shawn O'Connor, a friend of mine. He is also a chaplain at a state-run incarceration facility, a very old facility in Indiana, and he has decided to join us today. So thanks for coming.

**Shawn:** Thanks for having me.

**Jay:** Thanks for being with us. I have been so eager to get you to this point because every time I am talking to people, they have all kinds of questions, but this has been part of your ministry for years, being a chaplain within that incarceration system. How long—let's just start there—how long have you been actively involved, maybe on a day-to-day basis, with some type of chaplaincy in a prison or a detention center?

**Shawn:** If you include the time I've been volunteering, it has like over 13 years. I entered a DOC facility as a paid chaplain, not in a volunteer capacity, in the spring of 2016, I think it is—or yeah, the fall of 2016, I apologize. Since that, I have been in three different facilities, two adult male and one juvenile male.

**Jay:** And I was just sitting there thinking, you have been in a private facility and then a state-run one as well, or public. What are some of the immediate differences there? That just popped into my head.

**Shawn:** I am speaking from my personal experience in it. The first prison where I served as a chaplain was a private-run facility. I really appreciated how they ran the facility. I felt like they

were doing their best to honor what the standards, policies, and procedures were established by the state.

**Jay:** Because they still have to go have to go under the state policies. It is just that this is a privately-owned prison.

**Shawn:** In my experience, they talked about serving the client, like for them the client was the state, so they felt like they had to honor whatever the state desired. And then I saw what you might experience in corporate America in terms of how they were trying to serve their client. There were some creature comforts there, I think, because I have not been a prison chaplain my entire professional life, and so it reminded me of some of my time in corporate America.

And so I say that, but as I went there, I had some concerns because I did not know how I felt about privatized prisons and all the things that come with that. I felt like they did a good job, and that is not to say that the state is not doing a good job. There was just a different feel to it. There are nuanced differences, but....

**Jay:** When our team goes into prisons all over—and some are private and some are public—I know exactly what you are saying. There is a different feel. You are right. The private ones are working for the benefit of their client, which is the state, and there is just a different feel. I just wondered because I know you have worked in both.

**Shawn:** I do not know any metaphor. I would use would be doing a disservice to. I guess I would say that I do not feel—having that firsthand experience—that the private prison system is as scandalous as I thought it was going in. Is that a fair way of putting it?

**Jay:** Absolutely, that is good. That is the rub. Everyone always thinks it is all about the profit, and in some ways it is, but it does not mean that it is always corrupt from the get-go.

**Shawn:** But then again, as a chaplain, you are not getting paid off the bottom line, so the profit and loss statement is not coming across my desk. Maybe I would feel different if it did.

**Jay:** So being a chaplain, you get to spend hours in a place with men, and at one point, juveniles, in that environment. How has your faith been shaped by that time? I always tell people, and I tell you and others, that when I really began doing a lot of prison ministry, it changed the way I viewed not only inmates, but the established church. It made me deal with some things. So you are there 8 or 9 hours a day. How did that impact your faith?

**Shawn:** Do we have enough time to talk about that? What portion of faith? You and I joke because we met in county jail, serving in county jail ministry. There is just a difference in

ministering in a county jail versus in a prison. The tension of the moment is different in a county jail than it is in a state prison, where people are at in that spot. The first prison I served in was a medium-security prison.

The potential of guys leaving that facility and re-entering their cities—their hometowns where they got their charges from—was high probability. We watched guys go home from there. The juvenile facility—they were there for 6-9 months. They did not have a determinate sentence; they went there to engage in a program to help them regain school credits, work on their behavior—help them with some of the things that led to their incarceration. You know, work on their behavior and thought patterns and stuff like that. So it was the "churn," right?

Where I am at now is a maximum-security prison. The way I describe it is think about the prison in Shawshank It is a 100-year-old facility in the middle of Indiana cornfields. It has been there a while. The guys that are there—there are 1500 guys—only about 100 actually leave our facility and go onto the streets. Most of the guys that leave our facility if they do leave and they have the ability to do a bulk of their time and then "level down" due to going to the facility they came from, they will leave the facility in that capacity. But we have guys that—death row for the state of Indiana is at another facility. We do not have death row at our facility. That is up north.

So, we do have guys that are there that are life without parole or have substantial amount of time. I can say this from those different experiences, you are journeying with people in completely different stage of life. What their hope is in—what they are looking forward to—is completely different. I say those things to set up....

The number one question I have continued to ask myself is, "What is freedom?" What does it mean to be free? We talk about being free in our faith and in Christ. This is not my home; we talk about these things. This is our "churcheze"—This is how we do it. But when you are sitting with somebody who—this 40 acres that is entombed in a 20-foot concrete wall—this is the island they are on. This is where it is going to happen. I am aware of that. And where is God in this? Where is God not in this?

**Jay:** And I think a lot of people get this. This is a great angle because I think a lot of people on the outside, well-intentioned people who love God and would say that they are Christian and for the betterment of society, and all those things, I think they would struggle with some of the things that you are saying because the "go to" is, "Well, this is the consequence of an action." But you and I both know that may be true, but there was always a myriad of things that led up to that. It is not black and white.

It is not easy to just say, "Well, that is the consequence," because I do not think a lot of these men that I talk to, who are trying to live maybe even a Christian life behind bars or come back to

Christ, they are not as focused on "Do I deserve this or not." They are trying to figure out, "How do I stay free while I am here," or, "What does my life look like now?" It is low on the list until you get to a point where they say, "Well, I do not want anybody to feel sorry for me because I put myself in here." That is the go-to for us, but it is not reality. It is just not that clean. So, what does it mean to be free? What does it mean to be in Christ but then know on the inside of a prison? There are people coming to know Christ. What is our responsibility? What do you have to deal with? What are some things that you cannot tell people on the outside because they just would not understand it? This is such a complex area.

**Shawn:** Yeah, so when I first got involved in prison ministry, I went as a volunteer in a facility in LaGrange, Kentucky. A friend invited me to go. I can tell you all the little things that appealed to my person to be involved in it, but there was something about the experiences that made me want more, and it has gotten me to where I am at today. When I first started going into the prison, there was a part of me thinking, "I am taking something to these guys. What I have to bring them is important, significant, and it is needed." Then I went to the county jail, and the precariousness of that situation definitely fed those gears. A lot of times, people in the prison ask, "Why is there so much Christian activity?" Our text, in comparison to other texts, actually has a verse that talks about doing something with prisoners.

It says, "Visit prisoners." So, people run with that. That is not a descriptor in other texts. The Christian has to reconcile what to do about that: feeding the poor, giving somebody a drink, what to do about the prisoner. But here is the thing about that verse that I am not sure what to do about. The verse says, "I was in prison and you visited me." Hold on to that thought. "I was thirsty and you gave me a drink." It is easy for me to look at the thirsty guy and think, "Oh, Jesus is thirsty. Let me give him a drink." Jesus is saying He is the prisoner. So, am I visiting Jesus? So, I go into the prison and I am a chaplain. At first, I am bringing Jesus, not that I am Jesus, but as if I am bringing Jesus. But that verse says, "I was in prison and you visited me. You came to me." What is He saying about that? What does He mean?

**Jay:** You and I both have a love for good theology and good context of Scripture. Many are quick to say, "Well, it was a religious persecution," but wait a minute. Jesus was never really in prison anyway, right? Others will say that verse in that context is about religious persecution, so it puts a different category of prisoner out there for Christians so they do not have to think about the murderer. But hold on, He just said, "I was in prison and you visited Me," a very specific verse that is in the larger narrative of having a heart for the nobodies, which means having a heart for Me, so continue. I think you are onto something there.

**Shawn:** To stay in that little batch of Scripture right there, there would be some that would say, "Well, if you are hungry, you probably were not working. You probably weren't doing your part."

**Jay:** They do say that.

**Shawn:** "It is your fault. It is your problem. You are not doing life right. Clearly, you are not doing life right, or your circumstances would be different. You would not be in prison if you...." Everybody knows that if you murder somebody you are going to prison. Right, like they would not think about that. Most people do not know there are plenty of people in prison for murder, they were not the trigger person. When you start to listen to people's stories, and "I think he is full of it," and then you Google search and find out they were telling the truth, you start to ask, "What are the circumstances that get people bound up?"

One of the quotes that has been on my wall since I started doing this is, "It takes the unbound to unbind the rest." What binds me up? I can spiritualize that, but I also have to recognize that the flesh, the ego, gets me knotted up, gets me sideways, gets me spiritually hungry, thirsty, estranged, and incarcerated. You can spiritualize all that stuff, too. So, when you ask me how my faith has grown....

**Jay:** I have changed or broadened, or....

**Shawn:** Those are all things that cannot help but rethink the narratives and the ways you glean from Scripture and how you feel God is moving. The other thing has been kinship, recognizing, seeing you as me, me as you. What is happening? What is going on? When you sit with a guy and just hear their story, if you are honest with yourself, you can get there. It does not mean you are signing off on it or that you have the same things going, but you can get there. But there are people that—and the other thing is—we have talked about this before. We have been in some of the same facilities.

One of the best worship bands I have ever seen is made up of a group of men that would never be allowed to minister in a church. People would say, "They did this in their past? they identify as this today?" but the Holy Spirit vibes are real. What are you supposed to do with that?

**Jay:** It is hard. You are exactly right. You and I are kin to this, and there are not many people we can talk to about this because the barrier is so great. Just getting them to that point to understand how real and genuine it is because of the stigmas. I would go a little further. When we talk about incarceration or rehabilitation. There is no real rehabilitation happening.

Okay, not really. And because nobody loses the stigma once they are out. What are we doing? I mean, what are we doing to these people? Now, I am coming at this from a Kingdom Christian point of view. We have to obey the laws; we have to have laws, or there would be chaos. I am not getting off on that subject.

What I am saying is, as a believer, "How do I get others to not have to go into a prison?" to get to a place to say, "If there is a Christian behind bars that is paying his debt to society, he is just as real of a brother to me as anybody else on the outside?"

See, I think we are so far from that reality. And you are right. I have heard songs in prisons, written and sung by inmates that the world will never hear that are 10 times better than anything I have heard. How do you communicate that? That is the difficult part. But the church itself, like everything else, wants to have a very produced, step-by-step, structured way to go in and visit the prisoner. I always hate this "check the box." We have to come up with a new way to say that, but just to do what the Bible says. You said it Shawn. They do not see them. They are there, but they do not see them. When you sit long enough with somebody, and that moment happens—I will never forget a few times when that moment happened for me—when I see myself in them, and they see me. I just see immediately. God gives me this glimpse, and I go, "Oh my gosh." This is where growth happens. This is where faith is expanded. This is where God really wants us to wrestle, but we do not like to wrestle. We do not want to do that. You have to see it every day. You have to come home every day. You have to go to church on the outside on the weekends.

Give me a couple of things that you sit and think about when you are hearing a sermon or talking to somebody that thinks they know what is going on behind bars, and you are just going, "Oh my gosh." This is therapy; this is good. It is a place to vent on the podcast because we all do that. I will have people say, "Hey, you know, my uncle was a security guard at Blockbuster." What? What are you saying? They think that all of a sudden, now they know how all this works.

**Shawn:** One of the things we do not want to talk about is how duct tape and bubblegum are holding our own selves together. One of the things I appreciate and think has drawn me into the prison ministry, and where I find it to be a place that I belong, is I love the realness and the transparency. One of the metaphors I use with guys a lot is, we are talking, and they will say, "Chat, man, this has been just a refreshing conversation," and we are not really talking about anything super spiritual. It is two guys. Sometimes it is right after I called them out of their housing unit. Guards have to let them out of their door, they have to walk across the yard, and everybody knows, "One to the chapel."

The entire yard hears the officer's radio. They know somebody is walking to the chapel to get a death notice. They know that is happening. That is part of our role in the facilitator manner, so they know that. But you have a guy come up there and do that and you talk to them. They are distraught, but then just having somebody to talk to after they have been listening to three tiers of people making noise and cussing and doing all this stuff, to come over and then just have a conversation.

One of the things I talk about is, "Look man, we are just two hobos on a boxcar, bro. You just happen to jump on. I am in here. We are filling the time until one of us says it is time for us to go, and maybe we will see each other again." I do not think we recognize how much we commonly are on a journey. That is what's happening with you and me right now. Sure, we can text each other, call each other, share memes, whatever. But occasionally, we end up in the same boxcar, talking about what God is doing in our lives, what we are seeing. "Man, there are guys and gals being transformed." This is not a theory we are just guessing here. We are watching folks be transformed by what God can do in their lives, and it is happening right in front of us.

One of the things you do not always see in front of you in some of the churches is transformation. It does happen, and I know people are listening, "No, we see it all the time," but there are a lot of churches out there, a lot of people that faithfully go to congregations week after week, that it has been a long time since they have seen somebody transformed by the gospel.

**Jay:** Right. That is a great angle to run on because I see more of that in the prisons than I do on the outside, too. I think it is because you are forced to be authentic. You are forced to—it is like one big AA meeting. Nobody lets you get away with anything, and you have to be real. But I also think that God often is looking for one authentic moment with you, and when you have that, it is hard not to be transformed in some way. The outside body of faith still has way too many places to hide. After COVID, when we were kind of forced into some uncomfortable places, some of that went away, but not all of it, and we are trying to patch it back together again.

The church has found itself on a path that is, "What is next?" What is next to hold the people's attention who are not seeing transformation? We need to keep their attention long enough and hope that at some point there is transformation. Again, I come back to this: I do not want to have to send everybody I know and love into a prison to meet God, but it begs the question. You are a chaplain. You are there all the time. You have seen violence. You have seen people who should never get out of prison, but you have also seen transformation. What is the one thing that maybe the church does not know about your environment after they leave?

When they come in and they go home and tell everybody, "Oh, they loved it. They love us." They are telling the administrators how much they love us because maybe it was a big church that bought the chapel \$60,000 worth of equipment. Of course, they are going to say they love it. What are things that people do not know? What are they saying after we leave? that would be helpful?

**Shawn:** So, the premise is that you find Christ and then you become a disciple of Christ. As you are journeying out your discipleship, you are growing in your faith. That seems to be the premise; that is the pitch, the hope, the thing. That is why people are doing prison ministry. Outside of the facility, you see lots of people that identify as having made the "crossing-the-line-

of-faith decision." You do not hear a lot of people say, "I'm a disciple of Christ." They say, "I am a Christian," and I am saying that on purpose. Jesus, in the Great Commission, does not say, "Go therefore and make Christians." He says, "Go therefore and make disciples." I think there is a reason it is written that way.

Encountering somebody that has crossed the line of faith, is doing their best to sit at the feet of Jesus, listen to what Jesus has to say, and act upon it—being a student, being somebody on this hillside going, "What did He say? Are we really supposed to do that?" And then having somebody look at you and go, "Yeah, dude."

Finding those two combined! Now, I had the third one, actually doing that. Yeah, actually doing that. I am not trying to be scandalous; I do not have it all together, right? "Father, forgive Shawn. He does not know what he is doing." I am included in the "they" and the "them." But if you are in prison and you have had the ability to cross the line of faith, you are involved in multiple church services all the time, you and your friends are huddling for prayer, doing your best to live out your Christian faith in the midst of a very contentious environment, and you have been visited by people from the church on a regular basis. You leave, and that church that has been coming to see you cannot help you get there because they do not have public bus service that drops you off there on top of the hill.

The guy that comes in there has to convince his spouse it is okay, and this is not knocking anything, but if the spouse is okay with you going in there, but it is a whole other thing to then say, "Well, I need to go pick this person up." Right? It is just—there is the mechanism and how that plays out. It would be really challenging, and so you are going, "Where are my bros at?" I think it would be challenging.

**Jay:** See, it is always this with you, man. It is always like, "I know I am going to get another layer pulled back, and you have done it again." It makes me think of so much, and it makes me, you know, like, "Oh man, how are we going to—" But here is what I love about these conversations. I have seen it enough times where going in, and it is all about how you—go in. Are you receiving, or are you giving? And so often, I am in a receiving mode and end up giving, but I am really receiving because I want to help people on the outside understand something. That is, if the gospel is true, then you need to re-evaluate your policies and your procedures when it comes to this chasm between church and inmate. You are toying with people's lives, and I know for a fact some guys are so desperate for brotherhood and kinship that they re-offend to go back in, especially when they do not have any family.

I have seen the authentic church on the inside, and again, Shawn and I both, you know, we are not criticizing. What we are saying is that inside a prison, being a Christian draws attention and persecution in such a way as the early church did. We do not experience that out here, so it is really not apples to apples. I am not saying we have an answer for it or we are doing something



better than somebody else, but I truly wish there would be a way for people to slow down long enough to see themselves in these other men, women, and juveniles.

You said something earlier about Jesus sitting on the hill and the Sermon on the Mount. Are you serious? We got to do this or we got to do that? I want to go back to the murder thing because, of course, I have never murdered anybody physically, but I remember what Jesus said sitting on the hill. He said, "If you even kind of think about it and talk about your brother in such a way as to dismiss him and in anger, it is kind of the same." I want to stand up and go, "Are you serious, man? That is kind of normal," and He's like, "Yeah, yeah." Well, if that is true, then I have to re-evaluate everything that I do on a daily basis as I live in this world. We are not doing that. I mean, social media has been the graffiti of our time.

**Shawn:** I mean, if you look according to that, right, if I woke up today and I said, "What a moron," and I really meant it, I need to address that. The channel of spiritual, like, whatever Jesus says—You cannot go to the altar. Your connection is broke, bro." You cannot go around rifling that off.

And you are going, but we do that all the time with memes. We laugh at it, so I do not— But I want to be encouraged to grow in that. One of the things in the prison, the big thing is STG, you know, security threat group. Are you involved with this group, affiliated with this group? There are a variety of them. In the facility we are at, at one point, they started a security threat group that grew to the point where, in my understanding, they grew to the point where they were up for the RICO Act. So this prison people come together with bylaws and all this stuff. Guys network, selling drugs, making money, everything to the point where they could get hit with the RICO, running business outside.

I look for the day—you talk about planting churches—I look for the day when somebody goes, "What is this chapel? Who is supporting this chapel?" The incarcerated individuals at that prison started a church in there, and now they have a church plant outside of there. Why can that not happen? And I go like, so I have acronyms, you know, this STG: "Saved Through Grace." The web that the Holy Spirit has the capacity to create and draw people and capture people—it ought to be doing that. I look forward to the day when the incarcerated individual says, "We are tired of feeding the beast. We are tired of playing the games. We contribute to this. We are selling the cops drugs; the drugs come in from the staff. We are kicking them out to each other. We are killing each other, and this is only perpetrating onto our streets. When will it stop?"

I do think there are some things that have to be unraveled in that. You and I can do a lot of things, but in terms of bringing hope, going in and being a voice and articulating truth, bringing hope, and shining a light on things. I look forward to the day—I look forward to the day when—and I challenge the guys. Not you, because we just—the Asbury stuff kicked off, and I went to

them and played the video of it. I said, "Do you know what my number one question is as I watch this?" They were like, "What?" Finally, people are throwing out things, you know, this and that. One guy from the choir sitting over on the side goes, "Why not here?" I said, "Yes. Why does this—" and it is not because they need it more. So if the audience heard me and went, "Oh yeah, because they need—" No, no, no. We need them."

The church needs—the reason the recovery church is so powerful is because they are going, "This is—we have been fooled. You are buying into the wrong premises, the wrong ideas. Go to the feet of Jesus. That is the way, the truth, and the life." We need the incarcerated person that has—whether it is a systemic situation or personal situations, whatever has got them bound up—to say, "Look folks, listen. The veneer between us and you and the incarcerated is so thin. You are one decision away. You are so close to being here with us."

And so the incarcerated mission—the people in the margins have the best chance of creating a completely different reality for us.

**Jay:** Listen, and we are going to wrap because I want to have you back because we are just now opening up this can, this Pandora's box. I remember the day in 2017 when I stood in Miami in a prison and walked into a facility that had a chapel that was being run by inmates, led by inmates. I stood and said, "What am I doing here?" But here is the response. There was one man who came to tears because he said, "You are the only person that has ever affirmed what we are doing. Nobody else even sees it." I thank God for the grace that he allowed me to see, but I knew it is the day you are looking for. My narrative changes now. I go in with, "Why not here?" like you, but then also saying, "Look, you have the gifts to lead on the outside in the church. Maybe not in society because they are not going to let you, but I promise you God is going to use the marginalized to bring life support back to the church." That is exactly what you just said. I think that is really, really the end on what will happen. I do not know when, but I think it is going to happen. Shawn, thank you. We are going to do this again because there is just too much here to talk about with your experience. I know we will probably get a lot of questions and calls about this one.

**Shawn:** Thanks for having me.

**Jay:** Thanks, Bud, appreciate it. Sean O'Connor, chaplain, and I am Jay Harby. Thanks for tuning in to the podcast. We will be back soon, so stick around.

[FREE IN MY FAITH PODCAST]

[Hosted by Jay Harvey]

[NickV Ministries]

A Chaplain's Perspective

<https://youtu.be/xvXSZKwcIMU>

38:37

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