

An Experience in Prison

By David L. Miner

My initial incarceration began in March of 2012. For two months, I was held in Blount County Jail, just south of Knoxville, awaiting transfer to a federal prison. On most days, we were locked in our cells for about 22 hours a day. Each day, we had 90 minutes a day where we could eat a meal, shower, or wander around the common area and have real interaction with other inmates. Some days it was for lunch and some days it was for supper. I was new to a prison experience, having only had 2 speeding tickets 30 years earlier, so I only had the violent and hopefully inaccurate views of prison I had seen in movies or read in books.

I was beginning to get a reputation for always carrying my Bible with me when we had our free time. So it was not a surprise when an inmate stopped me and asked if it was true that the Bible taught that Black people were cursed by God. I asked the man where he got that idea. I was naïve but I was not stupid; I knew this inmate was a convicted murderer, so I knew my answer could be dangerous. Because of this, I asked the question so I had some time to pray about my answer first.

The inmate said something about what he described as “the curse of Cain.” So I decided that the place to begin my answer was to read the Genesis passage describing the story about Cain and Abel. I found the passage and had him read it aloud to me. He did and said, “See, God cursed Cain, just like I said.” My response was delivered with no small amount of fear and trembling, I assure you.

“No, what you *asked* involved God cursing the black race. What you *read* involved God cursing Cain.” He said something about Cain being the beginning of the Black race.

I asked, “Why do you think Cain was the beginning of the Black race?”

He answered, “Because God cursed him and gave him a mark that made it obvious that he was cursed.” He smiled in what seemed to be triumph. So I decided to address this prejudice head on, regardless of the possible danger involved.

“I can see why you might think that God’s curse on Cain was to turn his skin black, but that only makes sense if you already believe that Black people are cursed by God. There is nothing in the text we read, and nothing in the rest of the Bible, that suggests that God’s curse on Cain was to turn his skin black. In fact, if you look **ONLY** at Scripture and **NOT** with any prejudice, you see that doesn’t make sense.

“Let’s pretend that God cursing Cain involved turning his skin black. And let’s pretend that Cain went off and got married to some woman and had many children. Let me ask you a question: since God cursed Cain in a way that was supposed to be an obvious curse, what woman would marry and have children with a man that was obviously cursed with black skin?” He had no answer for that, so I went on.

“Perhaps the only woman who would marry a man that was obviously cursed, and that curse was to have black skin, would be a woman who was already Black.” He took that answer and readily agreed. So I followed this to its logical conclusion.

“If Cain married a Black woman, then he obviously could not have been the first Black man, could he?” This set the inmate back for a minute, and he had to think about it. So I went on with my answer.

“But let’s pretend for a moment that Cain was the first Black man, and that he found a woman who would marry him in spite of that. And let’s pretend for a moment that Cain and this woman had many children, most or all of them Black children. And let’s pretend for a moment that this was the start of the Black race, all descended from a man that God cursed with black skin.

“What happened when God caused the Flood?” He stumbled for a minute on that, and then answered something about the earth being flooded. I turned to the passage in Genesis that described the flood, and had the inmate read it aloud.

“So would you agree that Genesis seems to say that the entire world was flooded, or at least the entire area where mankind lived at that time was flooded?” He slowly agreed.

“And would you say that Genesis declares that all mankind died in the Flood except for Noah and his family?” Again, the man mumbled some sort of agreement.

“Then the people who now inhabit this planet all descended from Noah, right?” He silently nodded without saying anything.

“Then we have to conclude that Cain’s descendants all died out with the Flood. Based on Scripture, there is no more cursed race on the planet.” The man stared at me in anger for at least ten seconds, which seemed like an eternity to me. Then he stomped off without a word.

Believe me, I lived in fear for a few days.

After several weeks at Blount County Jail, I asked several inmates if they wanted to have a Bible study during our 90 minutes of free time. A few days later, five of us gathered at one of the tables to begin a study on the Gospel According to Mark. We started at the beginning of the book and studied verse by verse. And after several days of Bible studies, this same inmate, this convicted murderer, walked up to our table and closed my Bible. Actually, he grabbed my Bible out of my hands, slammed it closed, and then slammed it down on the table.

“This Bible study is over!” he declared with vehemence. All five of us looked at each other, not knowing what to say.

“No, actually we just started.” My response sounded almost stupid, under the circumstances.

“If you don’t stop this Bible study, I will kill you!” The last four words were said very slowly and in a very threatening manner. Several inmates nearby stopped talking and many eyes and ears were focused on our table.

I had absolutely no idea what to say or do. I closed my eyes for maybe three seconds, just long enough for a prayer begging God for help. Then I opened my eyes and spoke without thinking, which is often a bad idea.

“You realize we are studying the Bible, right?” I asked with real fear in my heart, but hoping it would not show in my voice.

“Yes,” he answered slowly, but without menace.

“And you realize that the Bible teaches that people who follow Jesus will go to heaven for an eternity when they die, right?” I began to feel a little more confident and hoped I sounded like it.

“Yes,” was his answer again.

“Then you know that if you kill me, you will be giving me a promotion. If you kill me, I will be getting out of this place right now. Do you really think your words are a threat to me?” As I said it, I was amazed at my own words. There was total silence in the entire Common Area.

Without a word, the inmate stomped away. I guess a soft word really CAN turn away someone’s wrath.