

# ONE PARISH ONE PRISONER

LEARNING MODULE 3 of BOOK 1  
Texas

## THROUGH THE GATES

NAVIGATING PRISON VISITS, EMAILS, PHONE CALLS  
& OUR FEARS



Early Christian and Eastern Orthodox icon of the Resurrection

By now you have been writing letters with your incarcerated friend for a few weeks. Letters are the first tangible step through the many barriers between the prison realm and the land of the living.

You have already crossed a line most of society never even nears due to fear, disgust, or unawareness. So, well done! You have begun a relationship. It's simple. It's radical. It's just the beginning.

This month we will help you open up more of the gates of Hades (the underworld, the underground, shown cracked open beneath Jesus' feet in the early church icon above) between us and our incarcerated kin.

You'll set up your email account for faster messaging.

You'll set up your phone to enjoy your first call.

You'll start the process of visiting your friend in prison.

Our work now is to expand the relationship.

- There are barriers outside of us which we will cross with letters, emails, phone calls, video chats, visiting applications, and actually crossing the miles between us to enter the prison gates.
- There are barriers inside of us that we may only now be starting to feel.

There's no video or book material this month. All the reading is right here. Set aside some time for visiting applications, phone calls, and video visits!

Incarcerated friends: keep in mind that this may be the first time your new friends have experienced the communication barriers you face. Be patient and understanding as they learn, and reach out with curiosity. As you read through the material this month, share with your new friends what may be different in your situation.

Ready? Let's do this.

## COMMUNICATION HUB

Emails and video visits happen through the platform of Securus Technologies. You should already be signed up but if not create a Securus account here:

<https://securustech.online/#/login>

Click on *Create an Account* under the SIGN IN button.

Once you've created an account, go to the My Account page, and you'll see the different options for communication with your incarcerated friend!

## EMAIL

On the My Account page of the Securus site, scroll down to eMessaging and click Sign Up, then follow the prompts. Have your friend's TDCJ number handy.

Once signed up, you will need to purchase 'stamps' – these are basically credits used to exchange emails. Make sure you send a return stamp to your friend so they can send a response to you!

## PHONE CALLS

Before you can receive calls from your friend, you need to register your phone number. To do this, contact the telephone vendor at 1-866-806-7804 or via their website at <http://texasprisonphone.com>. Follow the prompts for Registration.

Someone becomes more real when you hear their voice! Without some coordination, calling can be an awkward timing game: your friend may call you during their hours out of their cell, and if you miss it, you can't call them back! Establish a regular time to talk on the phone in your letters or emails. Try once a month to start. Save the incoming number in your phone with your incarcerated friend's name so you know who's calling!

Take note of what it feels like to hear their voice. Tell them about it.

*"I was able to talk with Antonio [on the phone] for the first time this morning. It was awesome to hear his voice. We've been emailing as well and the immediacy of that communication has really moved things along. "*

— Bill, Parish Team Member

## SENDING BOOKS

This is an optional side quest. Occasionally, teams decide to do a book club together, or they identify a needed book (for school, training, etc.) Once, a team sent an incarcerated friend a book on powwow culture for celebrations on the inside.

Unfortunately, we can't mail our own books to our friends, even if they're brand new. We can only send brand new books, purchased online, from the online vendor (like Barnes & Noble, Powell's Books, [Bookshop.org](http://Bookshop.org)) sent directly to our friend's prison address (the same one you use to send mail to.)

Please note: many online vendors handle used books. Make sure you're sending a NEW book.

## VISITING



Your team has already gone through the TDCJ volunteer and mentor training. Through this you will get access to visiting on off hours and communicating more frequently.

While TDCJ uses the language of "Mentor", we believe that you will go into this relationship able to teach about what you know but also to learn from what your friend can share with you in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Connect with the prison chaplain (you can Google them), to set up your visit.

## VIDEO VISITS

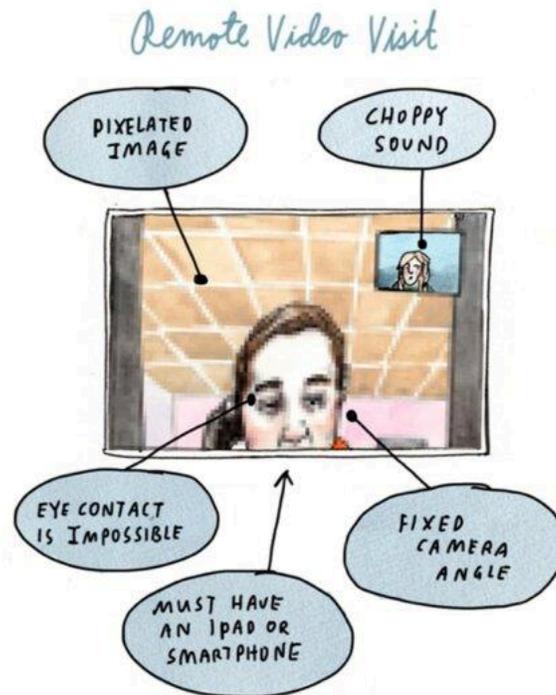


Image credit: Wendy MacNaughton @wendymac

During the pandemic, all in-person visitation was put on hold. We quickly learned the convenience - and curse - of video visits! Even when calls are grainy or spotty, it's pretty special to see your releasing friend's face on screen in real time.

You can use Securus to make video calls:

1. Sign in to Securus and find the My Account page.
2. Scroll down to Securus Video Connect.
3. Click on Sign Up, then follow the prompts.

It's around \$10 for a 60 minute video visit. Yes, it's pricey. But think of the gas you're saving—especially if your friend is locked up on the far side of your state! Only approved visitors can be on the screen, so no group calls or other family members "sharing" your call.

Please read over TDCJ's rules for video visits here:

[https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/news/remotc\\_video\\_visitation.html](https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/news/remotc_video_visitation.html)

Also please note that your incarcerated friend is only allowed one video visit per month. Visits with family might take priority.

Will this be a little awkward? Maybe. But think of all the practice you've had turning to strangers in the pew behind you at church and 'passing the peace', or talking to someone new during coffee hour. At least this person truly WANTS to talk to you. And they're probably more interesting!

*"Man, I'm excited that two of my team members got signed up for video calls, and made their "visits" with me last week. It was so cool to see their faces.*

*Yeah the connection sucked and we couldn't hear each other half the time. But it's getting real now. They really care."*

— Raul, incarcerated team member



## PRISON VISITS

Be sure to visit <https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/visitation/index.html> for the specific visiting hours and guidelines of the prison facility. Note what not to wear, which ID to bring, when to show up, all that. It's painful to make the drive then get turned away for some small detail.



Everything gets very real when you drive across the geography between the human warehouses we call prisons and the communities we call home.

For some of you, this is a one hour drive. For others, this may be a two-day pilgrimage. But pilgrimage is probably the best way to view this step, no matter the distance.

You might feel fear when you approach the facility with its towers and walls and barbed wire. Or when you pull up to the intercom, say you're here to visit "\_\_\_\_\_", and are told to leave your belongings in the car. When you step through security pat-downs and walk down long institutional halls, afraid of doing something wrong, you may start to understand why so few incarcerated people get any visits, and what families have to endure in order to see their loved ones.

You have entered the foyer of Hades. And you are embodying Jesus' incarnational movement, pressing into the avoided realms of punishment and disposal to enjoy someone's company.

It's best to go in pairs. It's how Jesus sent folks out. And it makes the commute cheaper and more fun. There's built-in time to process on your way there and back. And it shows your friend that they are part of a community, not a lone relationship.

When you finally sit down and meet your person for the first time, just savor them. Don't worry about solving any reentry plans. Laugh about how awkward this might feel. Share what was going through your mind as you drove there. Ask every question you have. Ask them to let loose all their questions about you. Try to be aware of God's delight humming through and around that visiting room.

## THE GATES OF HADES ARE THICK

Let's be honest: dealing with these online applications, setting up our SECURUS accounts, planning collect calls—it's frustrating. These systems are not catered to customer service. Don't repress that frustration.

You are experiencing the actual barriers between the land of the living ("contributing members of society") and the underworld, where society has disposed of those who are "unwanted." You are feeling how thick the gates of Hades are. They have been designed that way since ancient times. Today, we see it in arbitrary paperwork, difficult websites, inconsistent rules, extra fees, and poor scheduling. There's no customer service number with helpful, human representatives. The gates of Hades look different in every age, every society.

Think of what the loved ones of those in prison have to deal with every day just to maintain a relationship! You can see how kids lose touch with their parents; how these gates gradually end relationships, and our incarcerated friends become ghosts, "dead" to the world.

You are doing something rare. You are pushing through these gates, going through each step, for no reason other than belonging to the heavenly movement of Jesus that descends to the depths for Love's sake. May you feel, in these frustrating digital steps, that you are indeed part of Jesus' movement in today's world.

Jesus told his disciples, when he founded this movement (or, *ekklesia* – translated as "church") that *the gates of Hades can't stop us* (Matthew 16:18). This is what we were made for. Hell can't keep us out.

Or in.

Revisit the image at the beginning of the module and rest in that for a few minutes.

## BARRIERS WITHIN

"I do a good job at imitating caring. But I'm not sure I'll have an easy time dropping that armor."

— Jim, new Parish Team Member

The gates of Hades aren't just the structures we navigate. Jesus called on the community not just to roll away that heavy stone from the tomb, but to come even closer and help remove the grave clothes, the layers of protection and fear between us.

Here's a story of one OPOP team learning to name and gently remove these layers under which we all hide.



When Erin, pictured above, was invited by her pastor to join a One Parish One Prisoner team at their little Lutheran church last year, she came to the orientation with some fear. And questions.

"So, say I do this, and I write letters to this guy Wally in prison," she asked Sam (pictured below) at the orientation. "What on earth would I even talk to him about, given our vastly different lives? I mean, how do I bridge that huge of a gap?"

That's the question many people ask us when they get started.



Sam is our first accidental beneficiary of what later became One Parish One Prisoner as he returned from 27 years in prison. He even became an Underground Ministries board member. Sam answered, "There's no gap."

It's not what I would have said. But it stuck with Erin.

A year later at their church's Welcome Home Prep Sunday, the One Parish One Prisoner team members hosted an ice cream social after the morning service, telling the wider congregation more about the man in prison they've come to know and love over the last year of letters, calls, release planning, and learning.

They shared how this process changed their lives, and how the larger community can help welcome Wally back from the underground of mass incarceration with a Welcome Home basket of many basic supplies, and with a growing fund to "roll away stones" of debt, collections, fees, rental deposits, and other barriers to the land of the living.

Erin stood to speak in front of the church.

"So I believed Sam, went home, and wrote my first letter to Wally, just putting it all out there: *I'm a middle-class white mother who homeschools her kids; my life might seem boring.* I just went for it and told him about my lifelong struggle with mental health, how I have massive anxiety and even panic attacks sometimes."

The packed basement grew still, with full attention.

"And I got a letter back from Wally. He told me he was relieved to get my honest letter. He told me he had mental health struggles, too."

Erin continued, sharing how she grew to learn more about and trust Wally, and how this happened between the members of the wider team, too.

"I spoke to him last night on the phone about today, actually. How public speaking scares the crap out of me. And Wally told me, 'You got this, homegirl.'

We've become like mental health buddies."

We all laughed and joined in her—or their—new freedom.

"I figured," she paused, "if Wally can face his fears in opening up to all of us, trusting complete strangers with his life, as he kinda learns a new way of life, then his courage inspires me to face my fears. I can speak in front of you all today, and risk sharing more of the real me with all of you."

Bingo. This is what we call mutual transformation.

A retired man on the team stood up. He'd never been open with the church about his alcoholism, he said. He'd kept that private. But he knew his years of experience in recovery, his involvement with The Twelve Steps, would be an asset if he joined this team and welcomed someone home with recovery needs.

"I know people in the clean and sober houses, where the groups meet," he said. For this stoic man in a rural area, his former shame became a gift, a strength and contribution. His voice trembled and other men his age in the Lutheran church basement had wet cheeks.

Wally's brother Tony shared as well (pictured below). Tony visited a team meeting once to meet the strangers writing to his brother, found embrace and joined the One Parish One Prisoner team himself! He generously shared his own raw story of healing and recovery, offering experience and expertise toward his brother Wally's upcoming reentry.

In turn, the team has fallen in love with Tony and found ways to support Tony's next life steps along with Wally's. Once again, we lose track of who's helping who as the embrace grows.



Another woman on the team was concerned when she first joined and learned about Wally's charges.

"Not many people know this about me," she said. She then shared with some of the team that she had experienced domestic violence in her past. "I might not be the right person for this, I'm afraid."

But that opened up larger, newer conversations inside the team about how many people in churches have suffered domestic violence and never, ever talk about it. They wondered together: "How much violence in the home might still be happening *here* within the families coming on Sundays?"

*Kinship so quickly*, as Father Greg Boyle says.

The church members realized they never would be doing this—openly addressing this shared, painful reality in our stories—if it weren't for a relationship with a man with open DV charges returning from prison!

This led to the church hosting its first domestic violence education and training, led by an organization dedicated to helping churches become safe and heal from within.

Churches are full of wounds that need attentive healing: Mental Illness. Addiction. Domestic Violence. We've struggled to heal on our own. We're practiced in shame management. We're hiding it.

But in this church basement, I saw a multi-generational community breaking out of its own confinements, learning how to welcome the rejected parts of themselves.

This happened as they practiced God's embrace around someone whose past is less hidden.

When folks resisted Jesus' invitation to roll away the opening to Lazarus' tomb, Jesus said, "Didn't I tell you if you trust me on this, you'll actually see *the glory of God?*"

When Wally walks out of the prison gates, he will be embraced by a community bringing more of who they are than they thought possible.

*"It seems as though the more shame we have, the deeper we go into our caves. We do not want anyone to see it. We put a stone in front of our cave, so no one can get in, and we cannot get out."*

— Ray Leonardini, Founder of *Prison Contemplative Fellowship*,  
from "Toxic Shame and Contemplative Prayer"

## ACTION STEPS THIS MONTH

- PRINT & MAIL THIS MODULE TO YOUR FRIEND
- WRITE YOUR NEXT LETTER ABOUT THE BARRIERS BETWEEN US. Tell them about what barriers you're facing to be in relationship. Is navigating SECURUS difficult? Are you hesitant to share your address? Are old wounds from your past kicking up fresh fears? Try just putting it out there, and asking for help.
- SET UP A SECURUS ACCOUNT. Try sending a quick eMessage to make sure your friend is receiving it.
- SCHEDULE A VISIT WITH YOUR FRIEND, online or in person!
- OPEN UP THE PHONE LINES! Using the instructions on page 3, put \$10 on your phone's number, then invite your incarcerated friend to call and say hi.

## FOR TEAM DISCUSSION

- What stood out to you in the team's story above? Could you relate to any of the members' fears or anxieties? Could you relate to any of the underlying issues that came up?
- Some of your team may not yet have written your first letter. If anyone hasn't yet, now is a time to be prayerfully curious about what might be stopping you. Ask yourself, and ask God in the Welcoming Prayer time of your meeting. Invite your team to humbly explore with you: *What's beneath this block* for me? (It's usually not a time issue. There's often something truer and scarier to explore. There's also more freedom to experience through taking this step together.)
- There are many barriers to connection in our world. Consider your church and think about any barriers that might exist (like stairs to the Bible study class, no resources for the hard of hearing, an expensive fellowship dinner) and dream up some ways to remove those barriers.