

ESCAPE FROM CAMP 14

Part 1

This morning I want to bring you the first of two lessons, which I have named, *Escape From Camp 14*. I realize that is an odd title for a Biblical sermon, but before we are through this morning, you will understand why I have given it that title.

I want to begin this morning by reading with you the words of **Romans 6:16-23**

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17) But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, 18) and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. 19) I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. 20) For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21) But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. 22) But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. 23) For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Escape From Camp 14; you may or may not know that there is a book by that name, written by Blaine Harden, published two years ago. Harden's book is a factual account of a man by the name of Shin Dong-hyuk. Shin was a young man who was born and grew up in a North Korean slave labor internment camp, the only one to do that. In the interest of fairness, I must tell you, parts of Shin's story are almost beyond belief, but in many ways, that is true of your story, and mine, as well. The book contains horrific violence. It's a sickening description of the lengths to which man's cruelty can go.

My purpose in bringing these lessons is not to call attention to the story of this amazing young man, although it certainly deserves all the attention and prayer it can receive. My purpose is to use Shin's story as a kind of parable for what is really the story of every one of us. I do that knowing that it is not likely that any of us will have ever thought of ourselves as prisoners or slaves like Shin Dong-hyuk. But in truth, because of sin, every person born into this world grows up in a world that is every bit as much demanding and demeaning and destructive.

We have probably never thought of our own sinfulness as being all that evil and enslaving, but that is because we can only compare our experience to that of other people who have also been born into and have grown up in this world. As hard as this is for us to grasp or believe, the reality is, that had it not been for the coming of Christ into our world, every one of us would still

be a slave of sin and destined for the death assigned to the devil and his angels; a torment that will never end!

Even though I am going to be referring to this book and this man's experience, let me assure you, I am talking to you about the gospel; about Christ and Him crucified. What I am doing is similar to what Jesus did, as related to us in the 13th chapter of Luke's gospel bearing his name. There we read about some people who had come to Jesus with a report involving some Galileans who had been killed in the temple. For some reason, Pilate, who was the ruler, ordered that these people be brutally slaughtered even as they were in the process of offering their sacrifices to God. It was a horrific event and people were still talking about it but Jesus used it to teach people about something far more important. He reminded them that they too were going to suffer a horrible destruction—eternal torment—if they did not repent of their sins.

In reality, man's enslavement to sin and death is something that can be illustrated in a lot of different ways. Those who have experienced how demeaning and destructive an addiction can be, know that story well. In the scriptures it was so aptly illustrated for us in the story of the Exodus. So, the story of Shin Dong-hyuk's *Escape From Camp 14*, is just a modern, although a brutal reminder of something every one of us must never forget.

He was born just a little over thirty-two years ago, November 19th, 1982. Most of us have a pretty good recollection of where we were 32 years ago but this man's sad life was just beginning. He was born in one of a five or six slave-labor camps known to exist in North Korea. He was born in camp 14, the Kaechon internment camp which is located approximately 50 miles north of the capital city of Pyongyang. Unlike most of us, Shin's birth was not a cause for rejoicing and celebration. The father and mother who gave him birth were neither lovers or loving parents. In a place where most go never to return, they were simply two prisoners who had been given permission to sleep together for a few nights as a reward for their hard work. It was expected that they would produce children to replace themselves or other slaves who died or committed suicide within the camps.

After his birth, Shin rarely saw his father. They never had long walks or long talks with each other. He lived with his mother until he was 12. Shin's mother, Jang Hye gyung was not a mother to Shin in the traditional sense. The usual bonds of affection were missing. She resented him for eating what meager supply of food they received and which she hid in their cramped accommodations when she went off to work each day. Family life, as we know it did not exist inside the camps, at least for the internees. His mother punished Shin often and rarely spoke to him except to berate him for his behavior. He had an older brother named Shin He Geun but by the time he was old enough to know much about what was going on around him, the brother had been removed from the home and placed in a work detail. Shin was told by officials that he was in Kaechon because his parents had committed crimes against the state. They drilled it into him that it was necessary for him to work hard, and always obey the rules and the guards; otherwise he would be punished, and possible executed. He was made to witness dozens of executions every year so he had no doubt that they meant what they said. At

the age of 12, the mandatory age when children are no longer sent to the indoctrination schools, Shin was taken out of the home to become a part of the labor force in the camp. He lived in a dormitory with hundreds of others just like him. Until sometime after his escape, he never had a bath, never saw a doctor, never had enough to eat.

I cannot help but think of the words of **Job** as I ponder this man's story. You may recall Job that because of the pain and problems to which he had been subjected, Job grew to hate the fact that he had been born. In the **3rd chapter**, we read,

1) After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. 2) And Job said: 3) "Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man is conceived.' ... 11) "Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? 12) Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse? 13) For then I would have lain down and been quiet; I would have slept; then I would have been at rest, ... 16) Or why was I not as a hidden stillborn child, as infants who never see the light? 17) There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest. ... 20) "Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, 21) who long for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures, 22) who rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they find the grave?

Maybe you can identify with Job, and maybe not, but for sure there are millions of people living today who could easily pen such words, and one day, when the wrath of God has come upon those who have chosen to remain in those dark prisons they have made for themselves, they too will wish that they had never seen the light of day!

- In order to understand Shin's story, it is important to realize that for the first twenty or so years of his life, the only world he knew was the world of camp 14.
- He did not know about the world beyond the electric fences that surrounded him and all of his fellow internees.
- He didn't know about the rest of North Korea, or how millions of other North Koreans also suffered malnutrition and chronic power outages.
- He knew nothing about South Korea or China, much less the United States.
- He knew nothing about political alliances. He knew nothing about God, had never heard the story of Christ.
- He did not know that Kim Il Sung was North Korea's *Eternal President*, nor did he know that Kim Jong Il had taken his father's place in 1994.
- All he really knew was that he was almost always hungry, and that if he wanted to survive, at all times he had to keep the rules of camp 14.

Shin later would refer to the rules as the Ten Commandments. They had been drilled into him, and severe discipline would be administered to him if he failed in the slightest way to recite them at a moment's notice at the demand of any guard. Rule #...

1. Do not try to escape

2. No more than two prisoners can meet together
3. Do not steal
4. Guards must be obeyed unconditionally
5. Anyone who sees a fugitive or suspicious figure must promptly report him
6. Prisoners must watch one another and report any suspicious behavior immediately
7. Prisoners must more than fulfill the work assigned them each day. (15 to 18 hour days were the norm).
8. Beyond the workplace, there must be no intermingling between the sexes for personal reasons.
9. Prisoners must genuinely repent of their errors
10. Prisoners who violate the laws and regulations of the camp will be shot immediately.

The camp we live in has its rules too, doesn't it? Maybe they are not as blatant and harsh as the ones Shin lived by, but we must not let our personal, political and economic freedom deceive us. The prince of this world is far more cruel and demanding than either the Eternal Father (Kim Il Sung) or his evil offspring. We have to understand, Satan does not intend for people to get out of here alive. He cares nothing for you! All of his ways have one purpose, and that is to keep you and your fellow pilgrims away from the true knowledge of God. And when this world is all that people know, when they are told this world is all there is to know; when they know nothing about another world, another life, people tend to accept what they have and try to make the best of it.

Do you remember the words of **Matthew 9:35 & 36**? The Bible says,

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. 36) When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

I think that is such a graphic picture of the world! That's the reason why we end up with all of the hurts and habits and hangups that we have. It is why we live with impoverished spirits and understanding. We are crippled by our ignorance, hurt by our foolish and desperate attempts to make things better for ourselves. Take economic freedom for example. In our camp we are told that education will give us a better life. And from one perspective, that is generally true. But notice, it is an education in what someone else thinks is important. That someone is not divine; not a God of love and light and grace and truth. And we see now, how what is considered important changes from generation to generation. Those who are in positions of political and educational power have now decided we need to know that homosexuality is not only natural, it is also good, and therefore ought to be accepted and encouraged. Same-sex marriage is becoming the law in more and more states throughout this nation, and you had better learn the rules or expect to be punished severely!

We Christians sing, *This World Is Not My Home*, but most people in the world do not know that, they don't sing that song. This world, this camp, is all the home they know, and consequently,

all they know is to obey its rules. They do that and before you know it, they become something far from what they were created to be. They become sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless!

Shin's story provides us with a good illustration of this truth. One day, in April of '96, Shin was given permission to go home from school. By that time, he was staying in a dormitory. When he arrived home, he was surprised to see his brother there. He didn't know his brother well, but had heard that he was not a good worker, and so he assumed that he too had been allowed to come home because of finally doing something right. That evening they had supper together sitting on the concrete floor, and without any conversation, sharing a small pot of corn porridge. Later, Shin went into the area curtained off for a bedroom, but awoke later to hear his mother and brother talking quietly together about making an escape. Instead of being home because he had done something good, the brother had actually done something wrong, and had walked off from his job in the cement plant. It was just a matter of hours until he would be found and punished severely, so he wanted to escape the camp. Furthermore, Shin saw that his mother was cooking some rice, which she had not brought out for their dinner, and so he became very angry that #1, his brother was going to eat rice, something that he rarely got to do, and #2, they were planning an escape which would likely result in all of them, Shin included, being arrested and shot.

Shin had been made to witness countless executions which were often performed in a field across from his home. As a child, he had been brought up to believe that each execution was the just consequence of someone who had broken one of the camp rules, and therefore they deserved to die. He also knew that to be a party to an attempt to escape the camp would lead to his being executed. But what was even more important, Shin believed that if he reported the plot, he would be rewarded, perhaps with some extra rations, and possibly some extra time off from his work. Let me read to you his account of what happened then [[page 53, "on the floor..."](#)]

That night, guards went to Shin's mother's apartment and arrested her and Shin's brother. They also arrested Shin's father the next day, and they also came and arrested Shin. In reporting the attempted escape, the guard neglected to tell the authorities that it was Shin who had reported his mother and brother's plans. The guard seized the opportunity for himself to receive extra rations. Shin's part in the matter remained unknown and so he was held in prison for seven months where he was beaten, starved, and tortured in an effort to extract more information from him. At one point he was strung up by his hands and feet, and suspended in a U-shape over a bed of hot coals. Unfortunately Shin had nothing more to tell. He was confused as to why he was being punished instead of rewarded. It was not until many years later that he finally understood what happened.

His father received the same brutal treatment and if he has not been executed for his son's escape and reports of the slave camps, he remains in camp 14 to this day. Finally Shin and his father were forced to sign some confessions. He was then blindfolded, pushed into a car and driven to the place where numerous times he had witnessed many executions. By that point,

he had resigned himself to the fact that he too was going to be executed. He hated his mother and brother for bringing this trouble upon him. Let me share with you his account of what happened then [page 67, “when the car stopped...”]

I hope you understand where I am going with this. I don't want you to get so overwhelmed by Shin's story that you fail to see that this is your story. I know that we don't have to deal with the same degree of cruelty and poverty, but don't you see, this world into which we have been born and raised is really our prison. It is a prison that is using us, draining our life from us, and it will eventually kill us. Of course, the danger is, that since we do not have to work 18 hour days, and we do not have to eat rats and insects and lick cold soup from a concrete floor, we may think it isn't too bad. As unbelievable as it may sound, one of the most incredible things about Shin Dong-hyuk's story is that even today there are times when he wishes he could go back. As brutal and demeaning as it was, it was familiar, he understood it. For want of a better term, Camp 14 had been his home for 23 years, and psychologically, even now there are times when he is homesick. As I said a few weeks ago, the problem for most people is not that that they want too much, but rather that they settle for too little.

That's a part of our problem. In Acts 7, Stephen said that in their hearts, the Israelites kept wanting to go back to Egypt. “At least there we had something to eat,” they would say. We've grown up in a world that even though it makes slaves out of us, and turns us into everything except what we were meant to be, and then kills us, it is still our comfort zone. We find it truly difficult, almost impossible to really think about getting out of here, even when we know that there is something infinitely better!

Keep in mind, for almost twenty years, Shin didn't know anything about any other world, but then one day a new prisoner named Park was brought in and assigned to work with Shin. Park was someone who had seen the world outside of camp 14. He began telling Shin about things that was hard for him to even imagine. And so, there was awakened in him a desire to go to that world. How that happened, how he was able to escape I will explain Lord's Day, and then you will see clearly why Escape From Camp 14 is not just about a young North Korean, but is our story as well.

Have you escaped? Or, are you still a slave in a death camp? Hopefully, unlike Shin, you already know about that other world, and if you are sick and tired of the little bit this world has to offer, now would be a good time to make your escape.

As Paul said, “now is the time, today is the day.” If you wish to respond to the Lord's invitation, will you come while we stand and sing!