

TESTIMONY OF YVONNE COOPER

I was a high-powered Washington, D.C., administrative law judge & thought I had it made. I had connections across the District and high standing with former Mayor, Marion Barry. I climbed the corporate ladder, and nothing could stop me. Nothing except my own wrong choices. When the FBI marched into my office in Sept. of 1993 and arrested me for accepting bribes, my life took a hard turn away from power and prestige. I believed in God and had always considered myself to be a good person. I smoked, drank, cursed, engaged in sexually immoral relationships, & didn't see any need to change. As a judge who oversaw hearings for driving offenses, I never made people pay the full amount of their tickets, because I thought I was helping them out. But as I became more lenient with people, I started to accept bribes. Several months before my arrest, my cousin confided in me that a grand jury was considering charging me with bribery and giving me a sentence of up to 105 years. I couldn't believe it. When I finally calmed down, I convinced myself that my own reputation as a 4th-generation Washingtonian and a favorite of many prominent and influential figures would guarantee me an easy pardon.

Three weeks before my trial, I woke up after a late night of drinking and felt compelled to attend a Bible study at my father's church. I'm very clear that Jesus Christ woke me up. Bible study was a foreign concept to me, a non-churchgoer. At the Bible study, I learned Jesus Christ died to give us eternal life. I realized I had been wrong to accept the bribes. I repented before God, and all of my fears about my impending sentence vanished. It mattered not because I was going to have eternity with God! The judge substantially decreased my sentence by lowering my level of responsibility for the felonies. Even though I knew I'd spend less than 2 years in prison, I was unprepared for what I encountered at the D.C. jail.

I didn't know that to expect. When I entered the system in January of 1995, the institution stripped my life down to the basics. The guards gave me an ugly orange jumpsuit, a wool blanket, a child's toothbrush and a few other basic items. And I barely escaped getting sprayed down with Lysol. I witnessed rampant sexual immorality between inmates and between inmates and the guards. In the midst of this corruption, amazingly, I began to grow spiritually. God gave me 2 instructions when I entered jail: to read my Bible from beginning to end, and to take copious notes about my experiences.

The change in my life was obvious to my family and friends. I was always upbeat and praising God. As I read my Bible and acted upon it, I also helped the other women inmates put it into practice. Most of them knew the Bible, but they didn't know how to apply it to their lives. Because I was older than many of them, they looked up to me and willingly received my advice and developed wisdom.

After a 1½ months at the D.C. Jail, I was transferred to Lorton Prison for another 9 days. During this time, I learned that the prosecution had dropped its appeal and I was guaranteed an 8-month maximum sentence.

Although God was working in my heart and helping me put aside my old habits, I sometimes made choices that were wrong. But my prison experience also taught me God is gracious and freely forgives. God has forgiven me, so I don't need to beat myself up about it. I later transferred from Lorton to Atwood Women's Camp in Lexington, KY, where I learned to operate a computer and drive a forklift. Because I spent 5 months at Atwood, I developed deeper friendships with my fellow inmates there than I did at the other 2 facilities. I also shared the love of Christ with them. I never had time to do "Woe is me" in prison. I was too busy doing God's work. On March 1, 1996, the same day I finished reading through my Bible, I walked out the prison's doors, a free woman. Because of my experience, God enabled me to establish a ministry to reach out to prisoners called Kingdom Building Ministries. Under the umbrella of the ministry, I have spoken at many prisons and developed a street-witnessing program called Word Up.

Seven years after my release from Atwood, I truly look back on my prison time with thankfulness. It was an opportunity to go to prison. The best thing that ever happened to me was going to prison to learn what God would have for me to do. P.T.L.