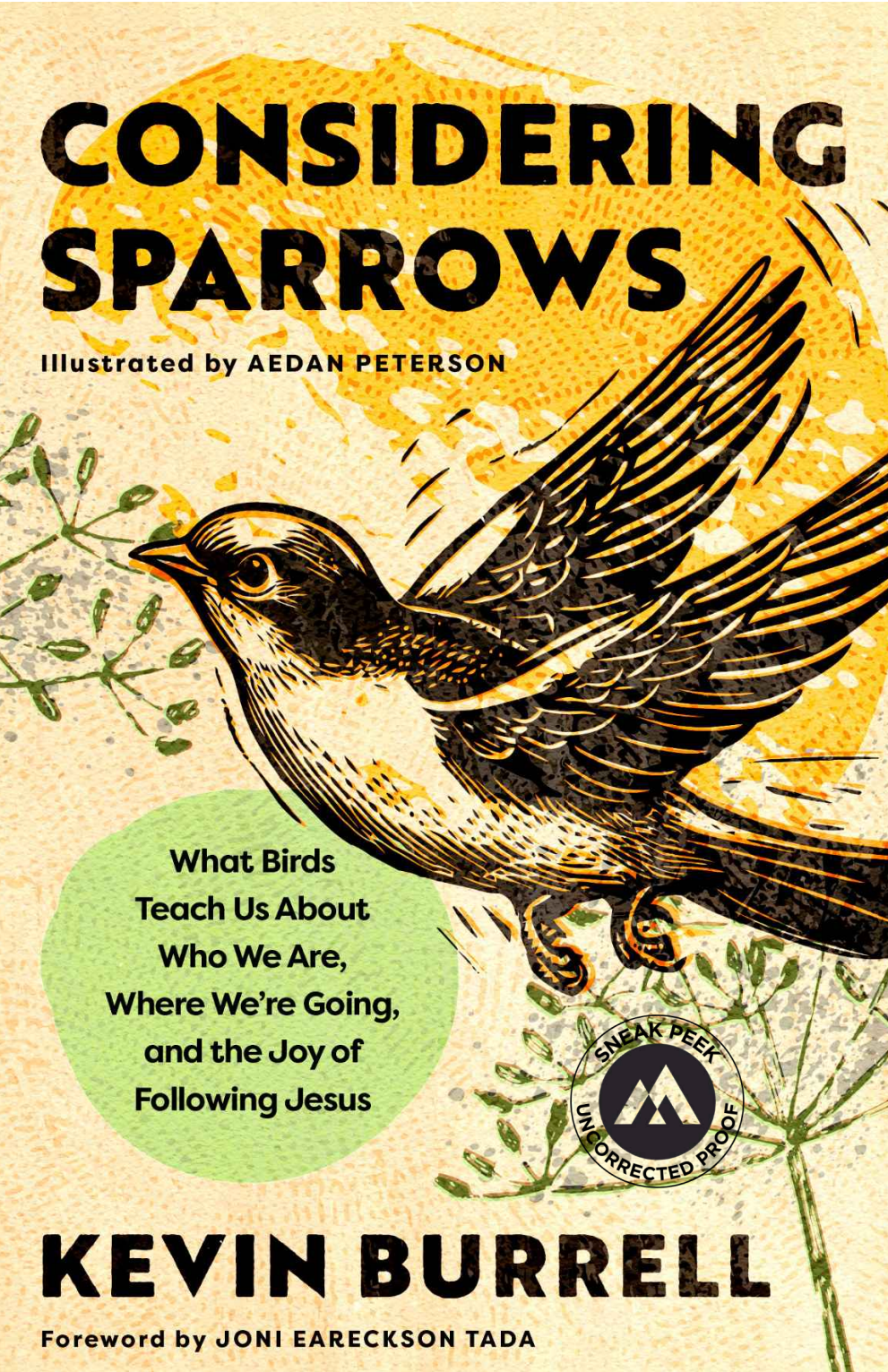


CONSIDERING SPARROWS

Illustrated by AEDAN PETERSON



What Birds
Teach Us About
Who We Are,
Where We're Going,
and the Joy of
Following Jesus



KEVIN BURRELL

Foreword by JONI EARECKSON TADA

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For Benjamin the Owl,
Katelyn the Magpie,
Timothy the Mockingbird,
and Beverly, *my endearing nestmate.*

Let no one think it absurd to learn virtue from birds.

—VENERABLE BEDE, C. A. D. 721¹

FOREWORD

Ask any friend who comes in the morning to get me up in my wheelchair. I love my backyard birds. The chatter of finches, the color of Rufous-Sided Towhees, and the flash of feathers around the bird feeder. Birds are the best! And if the feeder gets low on seed, my husband is quick to fill it to the rim. That feeder and a variety of bird books have introduced me to an array of towhees, American Goldfinches, Tufted Titmice, and more.

Friends who know about my fascination with birds are always sending me articles. So, I wasn't surprised when Mike, a pastor-friend in the PCA, emailed, "I don't do this often, but I am sending this link out far and wide. Kevin Burrell is a good brother, a PCA pastor, and for what it's worth, a fellow special-needs dad. He has become an eloquent writer on his blog about birds and theology. Take a few minutes and read this latest installment! You will be glad you did."

It was an essay about the Arctic Tern, complete with photos. As I read, I became mesmerized by the strange habits of this extraordinary bird, plus the lessons Kevin wisely drew from it. After I finished the essay, I immediately forwarded it to a batch of friends. I then clicked on the subscribe button to Kevin Burrell's blog, *Ornithology: The Gospel According to Birds*.

"Like all creation, the birds have something to say about truth, beauty, and a crazy-creative God," writes Kevin. "I'm convinced that, to remain sane and grounded on this planet, every one of us should make some sort of attentive effort toward some aspect of God's creation. You pick: astronomy, gardening, fungus, whatever. I chose birds."

He is right. And for those who explore the enthralling ways of God in creation, there is a double blessing. We not only find joy and delight in grasping God's creative genius, but we also have the pleasure of glorifying him. In turn, God pours on more joy, and we experience a fresh satisfaction with life.

But *really*. God has something to teach us from a Horned Screamer? The answer is in Job 12:7–10: “But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?”

Yes, the birds in the sky have something to tell us. I recall when my mother took me to the bird exhibition at the Baltimore Zoo. The aviary was aflutter with squawking, brightly colored creatures. Funny-looking toucans and parakeets galore. She then pointed to the sparrows fluttering in the rafters above us. I was sad that they weren't important enough to be in the caged aviary. But Mother observed that—unlike the parrots tethered with chains—the sparrows were free. Birds *do* have something to say. Even Jesus taught, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care” (Matthew 10:29). The lesson? God is trustworthy.

Every creature that exists was especially made by God to reflect a unique aspect of its creator. And in a way, Job 12:7–10 releases Kevin Burrell to be our official guide into the world of feathered creatures. He wants us to appreciate the astounding variety of birds on our planet so that we might praise Almighty God, the designer who breathed life into every remarkable species.

No wonder Kevin chose such an impressive title for his book: *Considering Sparrows: What Birds Teach Us About Who We Are, Where We're Going, and the Joy of Following Jesus*. With a title like that, we can be confident the author is a trusted mes-

senger of the gospel, as well as an expert in bird-ology.

So, I highly commend the book you hold in your hands, not as a thing to beautify your coffee table but as a stellar work to stoke your love for our great creator God, helping you recognize his glory in everything he has made.

Even in the Hoary Puffleg.

—JONI EARECKSON TADA

Joni and Friends International Disability Center
Agoura, California

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Prayer of Preparation

O Christ, use this practice of birdwatching
to refine my vision to more fully see as you see,
to look hard for the unseen and unpraised,
 as you so perfectly modeled for us when you
 admired the widow's secret sacrifice in the
 temple,
or stooped to the cries of suffering outcasts
 along the road,
or looked up with love at the desperate tax thief
 perched in a tree,

for I know my own blindness extends well
beyond the birds of my yard.

Let this practice incline my heart
to better see as you see, O Lord,
 my neighbors,
 my family in Christ,
 even my enemies.

Let this avocation of birdwatching
become for me a training ground, tutoring
my thoughts, my heart,
my habits, to more intently see
your love expressed in all the details
of your creation, your world, your people.

—From “A Liturgy for Birdwatching”
by Chris Slaten and Doug McKelvey¹

PROLOGUE

Why Wise People Birdwatch

This is a book that is best read outside. If that's not feasible, you could at least set up some background nature sounds on your phone and light a forest-scented candle.

If you like to birdwatch, I hope you know that, biblically, you're in good company. Wise people birdwatch. Really—that's in the Bible. First Kings 4 describes the great King Solomon this way: "He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish" (verse 33). His perceptive wisdom included biological interest, from impressive cedars to tiny crack-in-the-wall plants. And yes, apparently Solomon birdwatched.

Solomon wasn't the only Bible-birder. The sons of Korah knew the difference between a sparrow and a swallow as they watched birds make nests at the temple entrance (Psalm 84:3). Noah scanned the horizon, and Elijah scanned the Kerith Ravine, looking for ravens, although it's true that both of them had a lot more at stake than just logging a morning list. God challenged Job to pay attention to the ostrich, raven, stork, hawk, and eagle (Job 38–39), and probably also the ibis and the rooster (38:36), if he wanted to gain true wisdom. And of course it was Jesus himself who told us to "look at the birds of the air" (Matthew 6:26) and to "consider the ravens" (Luke 12:24)—both spoken as imperatives, mind you. That might not carry the same weight as "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), but it at least gives the impression of a

Savior-sanctioned hobby.

None of these characters in Scripture had a life list or a biology degree, let alone a pair of binoculars. When Jesus calls us to consider the birds, he wants us to understand things like redemptive love, trusting faith, and unshakable hope. Those lessons are the more important points, but Jesus used birds to showcase these greater realities. And so, on my best days, bird-watching is a means to a greater end, a window through which the character of God is illustrated.

All the world's a stage for God's wildly creative ingenuity. But when it comes to birds, we get the sense that perhaps God is showing off, turning the innovation dial up to eleven. After all, he *could* have made one species of bird and called it a day. Instead he overwhelms our global senses with over ten thousand species—everything from tiny hummingbirds and kinglets to the largest birds, like the condor and emu—in one creative breath. Each species turns the prism slightly to show us a different angle of a great God: He makes eagles to show his majesty, songbirds to sing his glory, and pelicans to show that he has quite a sense of humor. To learn, we need simply to go where the birds are—which is not hard, since birds are pretty much everywhere. There's probably one outside your window right now, maybe even looking in, wondering what you're doing with that forest-scented candle.

It would be a sad waste not to pay attention to all this feathered goodness, right? The songwriter Rich Mullins was criticized by some for writing a song called “Here in America” in which he simply sang about the beauty of his country's landscape. He replied, “There are people who think that it's a waste of space to write a song just about America—about how America is a beautiful place to live. But I think it's a waste of eyes not to notice.”¹ That bird outside your window right now would concur.

Author Dale Ralph Davis explains, “Since God has left the

fingerprints of his wisdom everywhere, since there is no place where God does not furnish us with raw materials for godly thinking, Christians should be seized with a rambunctious curiosity to ponder his works, both the majestic and the mundane.”²

I love that phrase: rambunctious curiosity. It explains how this book came about in the first place.

Ornithology Explained

The term *ornithology* isn't original to me; the word was coined by the famed theologian-birder John Stott in his book *The Birds, Our Teachers*. It's a great description of the interplay between creational attentiveness and biblical teaching, or specifically, the study of birds and the study of God. Although both of those undertakings have been a regular part of my life, they took on new meaning on my front porch swing in the spring of 2020. As a pandemic ruptured our normal routines and forced us to work from home, the porch became the location where I had two necessary ingredients of the field of ornithology: less hurry and more birds. The birds in my maple tree provided the soundtrack for my devotions and study and gave me a more grounded sense of time and space. Eventually I found myself writing a couple of articles about the birds in my neighborhood and the lessons they brought to mind. Things developed from there, with follow-ups on species beyond my own locale. Vestiges of my long-discarded undergrad biology degree seemed to find new life as metaphors of the Christian journey.

There are far more knowledgeable ornithologists and far more faithful theologians in this world. But getting to pull these two fields into something new has been a fulfilling undertaking as an attempt to encourage the bird-curious Christian and the faith-curious birder. Along the way, I've been grateful for

the people who have appreciated Ornitheology.com and have encouraged me to put some bird thoughts together into a book. But how to approach the task?

As a pastor, my preferred approach to preaching has always been to walk through a book of the Bible verse by verse, taking it in sections that connect the passages together into a faithful whole. Although the blog has mostly featured a random assortment of topics connected to a random assortment of birds, I wondered what it might be like to apply my preaching method and write my way through a book of the Bible “in bird.” This book is an attempt to live that conviction; think of it as “expository birdwatching.”

I chose the book dearest to me, Paul’s letter to the Philippians. In Philippians, a short New Testament letter to Europe’s first church, the congregation is healthy, the spotlight is Jesus, and the tone is joy, despite the fact that its author wrote the whole thing from prison. We should be all-ears attentive when someone writes from a jail cell; words born from chains carry added weight.

If you’re hoping for a commentary, you’ll be disappointed, although it’s my hope that you’ll know the book of Philippians better as a result of this exercise. If you’re hoping for a devotional, that might be closer to the point, although it’s a little heavy on the zoology. To strike the balance, I’ve committed to not getting preachy for too long without bringing it back to birds and not getting too bird-detailed without bringing it back to the Bible.

Secrets and Disclaimers

If you’re not a birdwatcher, let me tell you a secret about this book: It’s really not about birds. Pastors live in the world of sermon illustrations, always looking for embedded truth in

everything around them. We tell jokes, to the groans of the flock. We tell stories about our kids, to their horror. We share military stories and music lyrics and Pixar clips and C. S. Lewis quotes (oh yes, especially C. S. Lewis quotes), all in an attempt to somehow extol the greatest story—one that begins and ends in a bird-filled garden. All truth is God's truth, good stories tell the great story, and every corner of God's creation is a window to the gospel if we have the eyes to see it. Think of these chapters as a collection of extended sermon illustrations. With feathers.

If you *are* a birdwatcher, I have a secret for you as well: The most important parts of this book are not the birdy parts. The Lord can use something we are passionate about (like birds) to grow in us a greater passion for him. The signpost is not the destination, but it points there.

Anything worth writing should come with disclaimers, and I offer two. First, in the pages that follow, I will unashamedly anthropomorphize birds. As illustrations, I want to find places where their world feels like ours, and so I'll often attribute motives, emotions, abstract thinking, evil intent (I'm looking at you, cowbirds), and enough scientific faux pas to make a zoologist cringe. But for the purposes of the book, it's a lot more fun that way, and I'd encourage you to just go with it.

Second, I want to make my intentions clear up front: The purpose of every chapter I write is to point you to the completed work of Jesus. For some, that might feel too preachy for a book about birds. But remember, it's not *really* a book about birds. Rather, it's a book about the grander realities of how a life is defined by something Christians simply call "the gospel." *Gospel* means *good news*, and that's a crucial definition for anyone who wants to understand the difference between Christianity and any other religious or philosophical system. Good news is not good advice or good morals or good steps to a healthy marriage. Words like those don't have power to *cre-*

ate life; they only have power to *advise* it, and then *we* have to do the work and achieve the outcomes. But good news is vastly different. It isn't something we do; it's something we *receive*. We can approach religion as a framework that tells us what we need to do to get to God, or we can approach it in the uniquely Christian way of responding to what God has already done to get to us. How the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus does that will, I hope, be apparent in these musings.

There has been much written on the book of Philippians that will frame these pages, but I believe this is the first that comes with the exhortation to light a forest-scented candle.

A Brief Note About Bird References

A good name is more desirable than great riches.

— PROVERBS 22:1

Two brief comments are in order for the various bird names referenced in the pages ahead.

First, bird names are in a constant state of flux. As one of the bigger examples, the American Ornithological Society (the organization that standardizes all bird names) announced in November 2023 that it would be changing the English names of all North American birds that have been named after a person. This decision affects 152 of the continent's 1,100-plus species—more than one in ten. A lengthy (and probably contentious) re-naming process lies ahead, and so it's possible that some of the birds mentioned in this book have a different name by the time you read this. Honestly, though, this is nothing new; species are constantly being re-sorted, reclassified, and renamed. Even classic works like John James Audubon's *The Birds of America* were already out-of-date before they reached printers. Meanwhile, while ornithologists wrestle for the perfect name, the birds go about their lives, business as usual, presumably calling each other whatever they feel like.

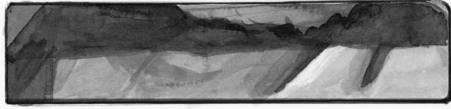
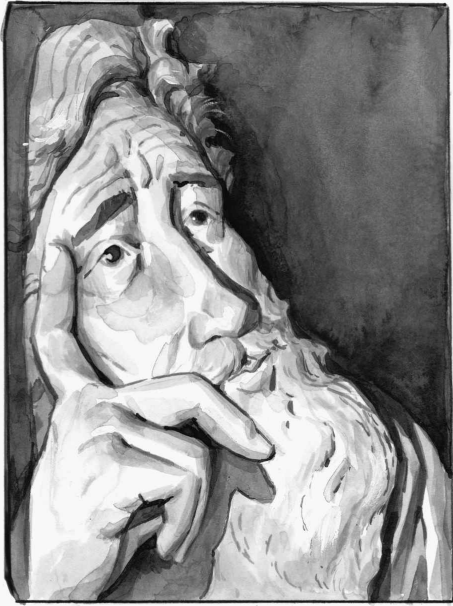
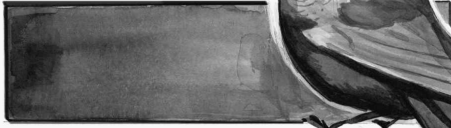
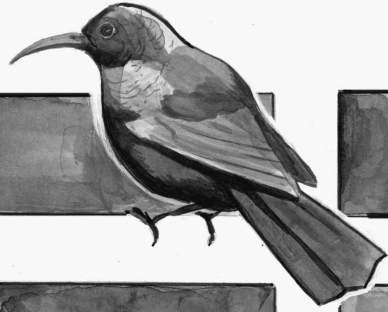
I explain all this to say, the names used in this book were the common parlance as of the date of publication, and a quick Google search should connect the dots for you if a name seems

unfamiliar.

The second comment refers to my use of capital letters when naming birds. The common (though not universal) practice in the United States is to capitalize the common English name of a species. At times this may feel a bit weird. For instance, there are lots of yellow warblers, but there's also a species called a Yellow Warbler. Most jays have some blue on them, but there's only one Blue Jay. Kenn Kaufman writes, "Readers unfamiliar with birding or ornithology may find all these capital letters jarring at first, but they help bring clarity when we're discussing the roughly eleven thousand known species of birds."¹ So when I write about a goldfinch, we'll keep things informally lowercase, but when I refer to an American Goldfinch, we'll give the proper noun its due. Hopefully you'll get used to it.

Let's start with the difference between a parrot and a Mealy Parrot . . .

CONSIDERING SPARROWS



— CHAPTER 1 —

The Caged Bird Sings



It has become clear throughout the whole palace guard
and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

— PHILIPPIANS 1:13

The soul helps the body, and at certain moments uplifts
it. It is the only bird which sustains its cage.

— VICTOR HUGO¹

DOES A CAGED bird count?

In the unspoken rules of “life list” birding, convictions may vary. A life list, as the words imply, is a list of every bird a person has identified in their life to date. Birders keep scads of lists: year lists, county lists, state lists, patch lists, yard lists. But there is one list to rule them all: the life list. To add a bird to your life list—to see a bird that you’ve *never* seen before—well, that’s a really good day.

There is no agreed-upon set of varsity-league birding rules for life lists, so birders tend to let their conscience guide them. The purists only count birds they’ve identified visually. The artists only count birds they’ve photographed. Regular-type birders like myself are usually willing to make do with any sort of ID, sight or song, so long as it’s definitive, making it a lot easier to bag those owls and whip-poor-wills. But there’s one thing all serious birders agree on.

Zoos don’t count.

And thus my dilemma. I was on a day trip with some friends in the Panamanian rainforest, enjoying an afternoon of canopy ziplining. I had honestly expected to spot some birds along the way, but the Panamanian canopy is surprisingly quiet in the heat of the afternoon, and more concentration was required for jumping out of trees than I anticipated. Thus far the day was a ten on the fun meter but a bust on birding.

As we turned in our gear and helmets and walked a dusty street to some nearby shops, I heard the clarion call of a parrot. I scanned the trees and followed the sound, turning into an alley between two shops. Lo and behold, there it was: a gorgeous bright-green Mealy Parrot²—a bird not previously on any of my lists. A lifer!

Did I mention it was in a cage?

The large square metal cage sat on a wooden bench in the

alley, with a youngish boy sitting next to it. The parrot jabbered cheerfully, as if he and the boy were having a casual conversation. A lifer, yes, but cages sure feel like cheating. Does a caged bird count? To reiterate, I had spent the day in the canopy of a *rainforest*—supposedly the pinnacle of biodiversity—and all I had to show for it was one semi-cooperative Crowned Woodnymph on the approach trail. The birds of Panama are not to be taken for granted, apparently. And here was a lifer, right in front of me and clearly not going anywhere.

In broken Spanish, I asked the boy tending the cage where he got the bird. He assured me he had just captured the parrot that week, and pointed to the nearby tree from which he had nabbed it. Ahhh, a local! If I'd been under that tree just last week, it would have counted. The bird could practically see his old apartment from here.

Today the Mealy Parrot sits on my list as Bird #275. Don't judge me.

A Church Founded on a Prison Break

The apostle Paul wants the Philippians to know that a caged bird still counts. Stuck in a prison most likely in Rome,³ Paul isn't in the most idyllic place to pen a letter; authors today probably would prefer a mountain retreat or beach bungalow for pursuing their creative muse. Furthermore, prison is a definite liability for a man called to be a world traveler for the gospel. I mean, the back of your Bible needs at least four maps just to describe all the places Paul went. Imagine God calling you to take a message to the nations only to be locked in a cell. Wouldn't you wonder if you'd misunderstood the assignment? Metaphorically, Paul's wings have been clipped.

We might expect Paul to lament his circumstances. "I'm done. I've been benched. My disciple-making days are over." But

there's no hint of sour grapes or second-guessing. In fact, Paul radiates encouragement and positivity in this letter. The tone of Philippians—beginning to end—is inexplicable joy. William Blake once asked, “How can the bird that is born for joy sit in a cage and sing?”⁴ It doesn't make sense to us. But then again, it *does*, in part because Paul hasn't forgotten the origin story of the Philippian church—a story that also prominently features a prison cell. Remember how the church at Philippi—the first Christian church in Europe—got its start?

Acts 16 tells the story. Lydia, the first convert in the region, gave Paul and company a home base from which to meet. However, their second convert gave them an audience, and not necessarily a friendly one; a miraculous exorcism freed a slave girl, but the subsequent loss of her dark-arts business enraged her handlers. And so Paul and his partner Silas, deemed a threat to the city, were beaten repeatedly with rods, sent to an inner cell (in other words, no windows), and fastened to the stocks by their feet. Welcome to European church planting, Paul.

Just hours later, however, they found themselves in their newly baptized jailer's living room with a home-cooked meal for their stomachs and salve for their wounds. What happened between Scene A and Scene B? What started with some harmless singing ended with a scene measurable on the Richter scale: “Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose” (Acts 16:26).

Apparently, the Lord is not confined by cages.

Years later, when Paul writes to the Philippians from his latest prison Vrbo, his Philippian jailer friend is likely one of the recipients. Imagine him smiling as Paul's letter is read out loud to the gathered congregation: “Whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me” (Philippians 1:7). The jailer nods knowingly. He knows the gospel still sings in a prison cell and that when God

is good and ready, locked doors will shake once more and release Paul for his next assignment. Right now, however, God has work for Paul to do in jail.

Sometimes God opens prison doors. Other times he works through closed ones. Paul speaks of how the whole palace guard—a captive audience—is hearing about Christ,

What has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. (Philippians 1:12–14)

Paul's cage doesn't impede his witness; it *amplifies* it. Prison unleashes his song. It brings the message up close where the palace guard and all the other neighbors can see it, hear it, and by God's grace, understand it.

A Cage-Enabled Song

My earliest childhood memory of a bird wasn't even a bird at all. Just a couple of doors down from our tiny house in East Rochester, New York, sat an equally tiny house occupied by an elderly widow named Katherine. My mother and I would often stop by to visit. As a four-year-old instantly bored by adult conversation, what excited me about Katherine's house was her bird. It perched on a swing in a small, round metal cage, a bird-shaped housing of gears and feathers in the form of a small white canary. When we wound up the crank on the back of the cage, it would swing on its perch and sing a thin, tin-sounding canary song. It was a glorified music box, but I was mesmer-

ized. As my mother chatted with Katherine, I would turn the silver crank on the back of the cage again and again, reactivating the joyous song of the bird inside. Without the crank on the cage, the bird would sit inert; it was *the cage itself* that enabled the song.

I said before that for the birder, zoos are life-list taboo. But just because I don't log them in my journal doesn't mean I'm not enthralled by a good zoo aviary. Yes, I know zoos are controversial institutions, and you may be one who has strong opinions against any form of animal captivity. After all, there are an estimated ten thousand zoos in this world, and certainly some are less humane than others. Still, it can't be denied that the best zoos incite wonder. An aviary brings distant birds close enough for us to be captivated by them. The colors of another world infiltrate into ours.

God does this with Paul. Throughout his two-year imprisonment in Rome, he wears a chain about eighteen inches long, on the other end of which sits a no-nonsense Praetorian soldier. These soldiers rotate through his day in four-to-six-hour shifts, twenty-four seven. We can presume that several dozen soldiers will take their turn at the other end of Paul's chain during the span of his incarceration. God fetters them eighteen inches from the gospel. From heaven's perspective, Paul isn't chained to these soldiers; *they* are chained to *him*—a captive audience. New life radiates from Paul's cell, all the way to the palace itself; when Paul says at the end of his letter, "All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household" (Philippians 4:22), it speaks of a subversive revolution, that people inside Caesar's own home are embracing the gospel.

Paul could never have had that sort of access as a free man, but faith-transformed soldiers are contagious. Rome is at the center of the empire, the palace is at the center of Rome, and inside the palace itself, the gospel advances unchained. Paul is

exactly where he's supposed to be, inciting wonder. The difficulties of Paul's confinement are also the whispers of another world, a message brought near for his captors and visitors to hear.

God is still doing this with us. It's in the challenges of life—the confinements, the damp cell of our circumstances—that the gospel has an opportunity to shine for the benefit of those around us. If you've ever browsed at a jewelry store, you know the finest diamonds are displayed over black velvet. Every jeweler knows a treasure shines brightest against a dark background.

What about you? Does the dark background of a difficult situation steal your song or activate it? Paul's joyous attitude as a convict is probably hard to swallow for most of us. We don't easily filter our difficulties through the lens of joy. A few sentences later, Paul writes, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have" (Philippians 1:29–30). The *opportunity* of suffering? Usually that's not the first thought that comes to mind when we're in the pit. But what aspects of your cell might be hard providence for the sake of communicating gospel realities—to you and to those around you? When life feels like a cage, what if that's the moment to turn the crank and activate your song?

God does some of his best work in cages. Should we be surprised? Our faith is built on it. The most confining moment of Jesus's life secured our freedom. His brief imprisonment moved swiftly to the crushing limitations of crucifixion. No one on a Roman cross was expected to accomplish anything, and yet in those moments, Jesus accomplished *everything*. Like jewelry, this treasure shines brightest against a dark background.

Following *that* kind of savior doesn't promise us a life of

ease. We have prisons to visit and cold, stony places to sit in. When we walk in his steps, they sometimes lead us into valley-of-the-shadow-of-death scenarios. But God reveals himself—to us and others—in those places. “Because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice!” (Philippians 1:18).

The Cross of Jesus is proof positive that God does some of his best work in cages. Taking comfort in that, how might you embrace the Lord’s work even when the light struggles to break through? How might your cell be your stage to magnify your Savior?