

Of Prisoners and Pilgrims

by [Jeff Plude](#) (June 2022)



Prisoners' Round, Vincent van Gogh, 1890

One of my nephews is in state prison and he emailed his mother recently in a panic.

Donnie, we'll call him, had been talking with some inmates about Christianity. This was nothing unusual, since he has for a good part of his thirty or so years been attracted to becoming a Christian. I say *attracted* because he talks and talks and talks about it, but then falls back into his old way of life. He was even recently rebaptized.

So he asked the small group what it takes to get to heaven. None of them knew, but afterward another inmate who had been listening nearby came up to Donnie and said the answer to his question was that a person has to believe in Jesus Christ.

But then he added: "I got your back. Just give me a hug and a kiss." Donnie recoiled.

A short time later the guy demanded that Donnie pay up for the protection he'd supposedly provided, without Donnie's knowledge, from an inmate he'd gotten in a fight with that had landed both of them in "the box"—solitary confinement—for sixty days. If Donnie refused to pay up, the Bible-knowing thug said he'd extract the fee in "anal sex." The modifier was no doubt redundant, but from my perspective it was extremely effective rhetorically.

Donnie emailed his mother and pleaded with her to immediately report to the correctional facility what was going on and to tell them "to pull me out of my dorm because I'm in fear of my life and safety." But then he called her and withdrew his request. She advised him to tell a prison guard about it, since they are required by law to report a threatened rape.

The inmate who threatened Donnie is serving a thirty-year or longer sentence. He's black and Donnie is white. Is that relevant? All I know is that if the races were reversed in

this case, the legacy media would likely consider it, based on contemporary coverage, not only relevant but prominent.

Donnie is scheduled to be released in just under two years, though he may get out a few months early for good behavior; so he's at least more than halfway through his four-year sentence. He was convicted of several counts of felony larceny. He made no attempt to conceal himself from a video camera that recorded one of the thefts—"I wanted to be caught," he told his mother. He was homeless. He'd had several jobs in landscaping. One of the owners liked him and gave him several chances and bent over backwards for him, but it didn't matter. When Donnie didn't feel like going to work, he didn't go to work. So in the end the good-hearted business owner had no choice but to fire him.

He's the third and youngest child of his mother, who also has two kids from an earlier marriage. His parents—his father was a truck driver and an alcoholic—were divorced when Donnie was just a few years old. After that his father moved out of state and pretty much forgot about him, except when Donnie's mother took him to court for child support. During this time his mother tried to make up for what a father should've been doing with Donnie, things like coaching t-ball and even Pop Warner. She got married for the last time over two decades ago, when Donnie was in middle school, and she became a Christian along with her new husband. They're still happily married.

Donnie seemed to inherit some of his father's worst traits. His mother tells a story about how Donnie was kicked out of preschool when he was two and a half years old because he was repeatedly knocking kids on the head with a beach pail.

Of course things got worse as Donnie grew older. Eventually he turned against his mother and stepfather, who were doing their best to help him. He reported them for child abuse and Donnie told all kinds of extravagant lies about his mother and stepfather.

When Donnie was fifteen he wound up in a “juvenile youth sanctuary”—a group home for boys—over an hour away from home for an entire school year.

After this Donnie’s life seemed to lead him directly to where he is now. He abused various drugs. He was in and out of jail for various offenses, including assault. But this was county jail, and he wasn’t in for too long. During one stint he was in for several months and it was perhaps one of the best times of his young life: he went cold turkey and got clean, but only because he was behind bars. During these times, as now, he’d reassure his mother that he was a believer. She took what he said with a whole mine full of salt.

He even was married for a brief time, and had an infant daughter. It seemed like his life was taking a turn for the better. Except he discovered that the child wasn’t his. His mother had suspicions, and had him collect a DNA sample from the baby and sent it away for testing.

After that he continued downhill until he crashed in the state penitentiary, the graduate school of the penal system.

Donnie’s mother told us that he wanted people he knew to write to him. A letter is the next best thing to a visit. Jesus, in fact, exhorts his disciples to visit prisoners:

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For ... I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, . . . when saw we thee . . . in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (Matthew 25:34-40)

But Donnie wrote to me and my wife first. For Christmas we had sent him a “new believer’s” New Testament with extensive

commentary that we thought would help him. He sent us a two-page letter. It started with him thanking us and asking us how we were doing. It was handwritten, which is saying something for somebody his age.

So we owe him a letter, and I've been deputed to draft it.

But I'm at a loss about what to tell him. He already knows the most important thing I would say to him: to turn away from his sins and believe in Christ, which means to follow him—to obey him, to trust in him—and to read and study the Bible daily. But in order for him to become a true believer the Holy Spirit must enter his soul, as it does with all believers when they truly, honestly, unequivocally believe. After that he needs to join a good church, which he mentioned he plans on doing.

There are some troubling signs in Donnie's letter. He seems to exaggerate and inflate himself. "I have dreams of having multiple successful ideas/businesses. I would then in return help change lives ... millions of lives! I don't know how. I don't know when." He says he's given his mother "kinda" an idea of what he wants to "put into play" when he's released. Of course his mother told us that he was just as vague with her.

I'd suggest to Donnie that he start slow and small. It sounds to me like he's trying to do an end run, to make up for lost time, which is understandable in a sense. But God will reveal his plan for Donnie's life bit by bit to him, but he must be patient and pray for wisdom and guidance. Decide what few things to do next and follow through on them. He has said he likes landscaping work. He likes the idea of starting a business. So perhaps he could get another job as a landscaper, but this time he'd attend work regularly, do his job faithfully, and learn from the owner about what it takes to start a landscaping business and keep it running. He could learn about grass and shrubs and all the ins and outs of the trade. It sounds much less sexy, but it's much more solid.

Eddie Felson passionately points out in *The Hustler*, “Anything can be great. I don’t care, bricklaying can be great, if a guy knows. If he knows what he’s doing and why, and he can make it come off.”

As Jesus illustrates in a famous parable, it’s better to take a lower seat as a wedding guest and have the host come over to you and say, “Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee,” than the other way around—“And he that bade thee . . . come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room.” One ends in humiliation and discouragement, the other in validation and encouragement.

Take the lower seat, do your work well, and have faith.

Likewise Donnie says the scriptures tell him that his dreams “are precious and unique, and they were given to me by God—‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ says the Lord. ‘They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.’”

He’s quoting Jeremiah 29:11, but unfortunately out of context. To be fair to Donnie, many believers make the same mistake—the verse appears on t-shirts, bumper stickers, etc. This prophecy applies to the ancient Israelites who were conquered by the Babylonians and taken to their country to live in captivity, and God, through Jeremiah, was comforting his people. They were being punished for their sins, and they were going to be in exile for seventy years. But God wanted them to know that he hadn’t forsaken them (meaning Israel) and that he would eventually return them to their homeland, restore them as a nation and into his favor, after their chastening was complete. But it was an eternal promise and hope, not, for some of them, a temporal one. Not all of them would live long enough to be repatriated to a rebuilt Jerusalem.

This has nothing to do with God telling individual believers

that he has big plans for them. Of course God does have a destiny for each of us. As Jeremiah also says, God knew us before he created us and before we were in our mother's womb.

Coincidentally the pastor of the church that my wife and I recently started attending is a retired prison guard who used to work at Sing Sing ("I have scars," he says), and he addressed this very topic in one of his recent sermons. He was expounding Colossians, and Paul starts his letter out to the believers in Colosse by telling them, among other things, that if they "walk worthy of the lord" they will be "pleasing" to him and "fruitful" in his eyes. The screw-turned-pastor, who has Christian-themed tattoos on his right forearm and is a former drug addict, seemed to be talking in his Bronx accent directly to Donnie: "And if you think that God is in heaven—and I don't even know if you use these terms anymore but, he's your 'sugar daddy,' and just wants you to be *happy*, have this best life *now*. Guess what? Your pleasure and your glory is supreme, not God."

And this is exactly what Donnie seems to be doing. He's intelligent, in my judgment, but his reading skills need training. The Bible is a literary undertaking as well as a spiritual one, and while I don't mean literary in the erudite sense I do mean it in its critical sense. This is where the Holy Spirit in each true believer acts as a teacher and guide. To his credit, Donnie earned a GED after dropping out of high school. But now he needs to become biblically literate, to not just memorize verses but to understand what they truly mean.

That's why I'd recommend that he develop a solid reading habit. He probably thinks he already has one. He's told his mother he's read the Left Behind series (loosely based on the end times as prophesied in the Bible) and one of Tim Dorsey's novels (à la Carl Hiaasen). To my taste they're schlocky and sophomoric, respectively. I don't think that so long as a person is reading any old book will do. I enjoy some genre fiction, but not indiscriminately. "A precondition for reading

good books," Schopenhauer said, "is not reading bad ones: for life is short."

If Donnie wants to read fiction with a biblical theme John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* would be a lot better choice, in my view, than popular contemporary Christian fiction. It's so good that it's been [praised](#) by prominent authors of all stripes believers and atheists alike. Samuel Johnson cited it as one of only three books he wished would never end. It's plainly written as well, and beautifully too. Donnie might be interested to know that Bunyan started writing it while he was in prison.

Donnie is also apparently interested in conspiracy books. There are some conspiracy theories that are more than mere theory; even Revelation declares that the Antichrist will set up a New World Order of sorts. But I think much of that line of study, at least of what's useful, quickly becomes repetitive. What may interest him because of this same curiosity and prove more fruitful, though not flawless, is history proper. He may find it much different than the loaded subject he was supposed to learn about in high school, now under the modern guise of social studies.

There's Edward Gibbon's six volumes of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. This would give Donnie a deeper sense of the world Christ was born into, lived in, and ultimately executed by. But he'll have to build up for that intellectual tournament. Much more accessible and equally interesting is the "The American Gibbon," Francis Parkman, who wrote the vibrant *France and England in North America* in seven volumes about the settling of this continent. It also reads plainly, and what's more, like an adventure novel.

He may also enjoy *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Though an avowed unbeliever, Franklin has many intriguing things to say about the practical art of living and especially about business. Donnie may be interested to know that when

Franklin was a young man he spent the first couple of hours of the day reading. He was also a pioneer of the now popular movement known as FIRE (financial independence, retire early), stepping away from his printing business in his early forties and living for as many years afterword working on inventions and diplomacy.

It's all well and good for me to recommend this book and that. But I know Donnie won't read something with profit unless it interests him. Somehow, I think, he must develop taste, which sounds lofty but may be simpler than it seems. Maybe it's like knowing the difference between junk food and real food.

I think of my own case with music. I grew up on classic rock. I had no interest in classical music, though in college I began to enjoy reading classic literature. My wife, however, played the violin when she was a schoolgirl and when we were in our early thirties, though she grew up listening to rock just like I did (though she was nowhere as steeped in it), she bought a CD of famous adagios by various composers. I gradually became attuned to it, and now I like a wide range of classical music.

At the end of his letter Donnie seems to come to his senses: "This isn't about me. It's about God's glory! Pray for my continued sobriety and protection. Pray that I don't lose sight again on what God is wanting me to do for his people."

From his and our lips to God's ears. Donnie's mother tells us that she hasn't heard from him, which she considers a good sign. Perhaps he reported the threat and was put back in solitary confinement. That's where he wrote us the letter from before. Maybe in a sense we've all been there before.

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