

# REAL-LIFE CHANGES

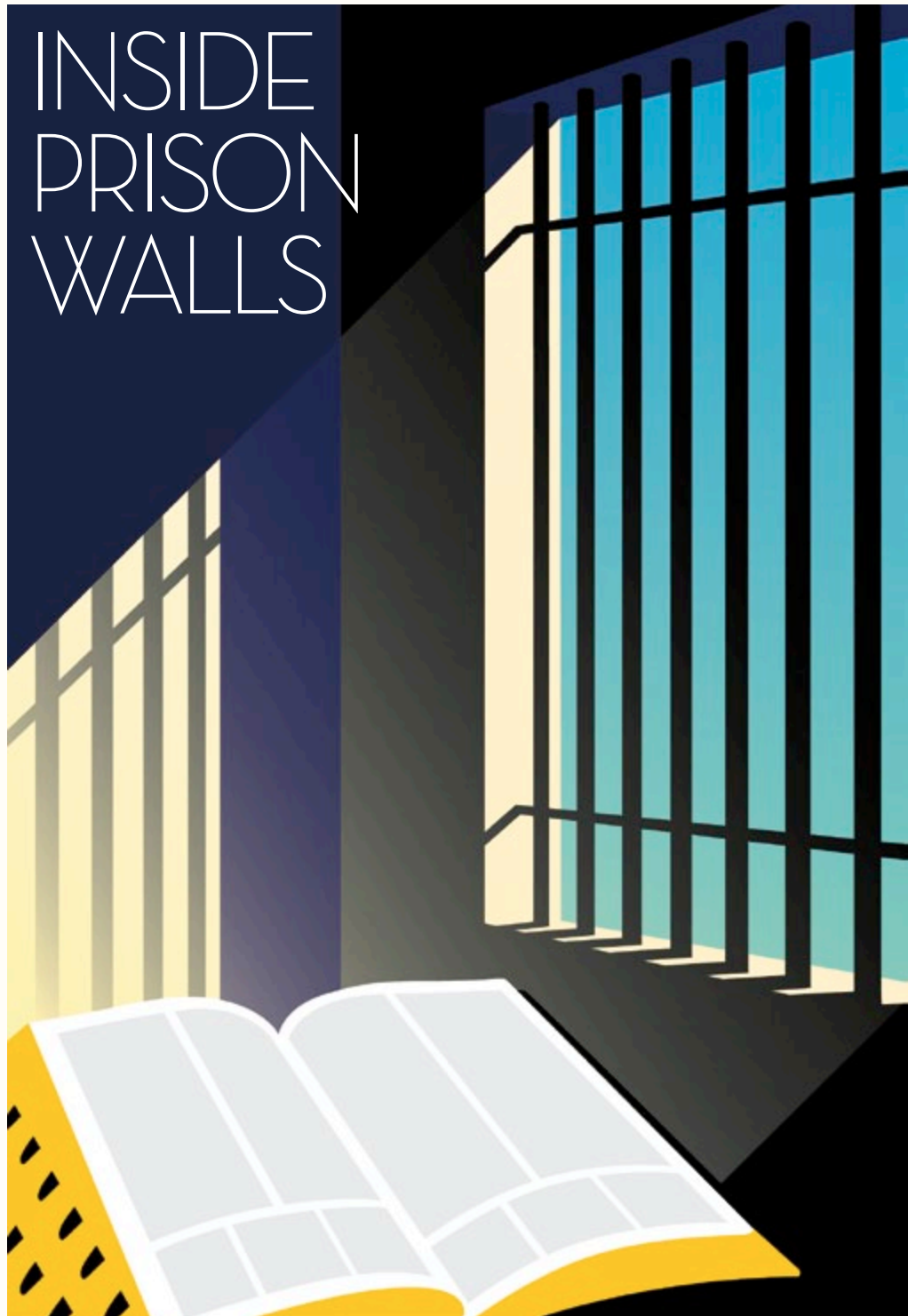
*Through the Savior's healing power, many inmates are making progress in becoming what Heavenly Father wants them to become.*

By S. Brent Scharman

The image of prison life might conjure up words like accountability, punishment, structure, and discipline. There is truth in all of those associations. But just as relevant are words like repentance, Atonement, Spirit, and conversion.

As a high councilor and later a bishop serving a correctional services unit, I have come to discover that prisons are places of paradox: harshness combines with opportunities for spiritual growth. I've had the chance to observe what happens when inmates choose to participate in the Church where it is available. Some of the benefits are easy to see: inmates make better use of their time, associate with others who are improving their lives, learn correct behavior through the modeling of ecclesiastical leaders, and learn gospel doctrines and principles. Other benefits are less visible but may be more enduring, such as when the inmate's soul is enlarged or expanded (see Alma 5:9; 32:28).

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles



referred to the process of internal change that each of us—inmates or not—experience: “The Final Judgment is not just an evaluation of a sum total of good and evil acts—what we have *done*. It is an acknowledgment of the final effect of our acts and thoughts—what we have *become*.”<sup>1</sup> This is good news: many within prisons, jails, and halfway houses are learning from their bad choices and are becoming what Heavenly Father would have them become.

John (name has been changed) was raised in a home where alcohol and drugs played a significant part in daily family life. As an adolescent, John got into more trouble than his peers, and by his early 20s he’d been in and out of jail several times. At 25, he was in prison, in a section with limited contact, facing a 15-year sentence. But in the time between John’s sentencing and the day I met him, he had been introduced to the gospel of Jesus Christ. On his own, John had borrowed the Bible and latter-day scriptures from the library. His gospel knowledge was obvious, but more important was his spiritual maturity. His remorse for prior behavior, love for the Savior, and confidence in the Atonement were powerful witnesses of the workings of the Spirit in one who was incarcerated.

Many inmates wrestle with addictions. How they cope upon release is critical to their success. Some facilities make treatment or self-help programs available. These words, written by a group of recovering addicts, from *A Guide to Addiction Recovery and Healing* are relevant: “We have known great sorrow, but we have seen the power of the Savior turn our most devastating defeats into glorious spiritual victories. We who once lived with daily depression, anxiety, fear, and debilitating anger now experience joy and peace. We have witnessed miracles in our own lives and in the lives of others who were ensnared in addiction.”<sup>2</sup> These inspiring words are not idealistic theory. They convey realistic hope to inmates who are accessing the Savior’s healing power.

I’m not sure I’ve ever felt the Spirit more strongly than in a meeting where approximately 100 inmates were celebrating Easter. The choir was surprisingly capable and demonstrated genuine emotion and sincerity. Inmates gave from-the-heart testimonials about their need for the

Savior’s help in bringing about real change. The feelings in the meeting that day were of hope, optimism, and love. Of course, it would be naïve to believe that even with their sincerity, all these inmates would turn their lives around. Nevertheless, it would be unnecessarily cynical and uncharitable to doubt that they could succeed.

Another evidence of the conversion process comes in observing the communication network—both formal and informal—in prison systems. Inmates have ways of finding out how those who have been released are doing. LDS inmates rejoice to hear of the success of one who is “making it on the outside.” What separates those who succeed from those who don’t? The answer is predictable: Those who change find God, new friends, and a job. One inmate incarcerated in Utah said, “From my cell I can see the Jordan River Temple. I’ve made a promise to Heavenly Father, my family, and myself that when I’m released I will work as hard as I can to change my life. Getting a temple recommend will be tangible evidence that my Heavenly Father and the Savior have accepted my repentance. We look forward to the day when we can stand on the temple grounds together and see how far I’ve come.”

It may be easy for those in prison to feel like giving up. The words of President Henry B. Eyring, First Counselor in the First Presidency, provide hope:

“There will surely be some who hear my voice who will have this thought come into their minds: ‘But the temptations are too great for me. I have resisted as long as I can. For me, the commandments are too hard. The standard is too high.’

“That is not so. The Savior is our Advocate with the Father. He knows our weaknesses. He knows how to succor those who are tempted.”<sup>3</sup>

It is because of the Savior that *all* of us can make real progress—experience true conversion—in becoming what Heavenly Father wants us to become. ■

*The author lives in Utah, USA.*

#### NOTES

1. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2000, 32.
2. *Addiction Recovery Program: A Guide to Addiction Recovery and Healing* [2005], v. This booklet (item no. 36764) is available online at [ldsfamilyservices.org](http://ldsfamilyservices.org), through Church distribution centers, or through [store.lds.org](http://store.lds.org).
3. Henry B. Eyring, “As a Child,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 17.