

ON THE PRISON TRAINS

The first half of my ten-year sentence was to end March 31, 1979. In late March, I was taken to the Yakutsk jail, where I spent a week in constant expectation, wondering where I would be sent for my exile.

One evening, when all thirty prisoners in that jail were lined up in the corridor for attendance, one of the officers recognized me.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“My five years of camp are over and I have five years of exile ahead of me. Do you know where they’re sending me?”

He looked through my file. “Yes,” he said. “You will be near Tyumen in western Siberia.”

Late that evening we were loaded onto a police van and taken to the airport. A small plane was waiting for us and the guards. All prisoners were handcuffed. Each time the cold steel pinched my wrists, joy burst upon my heart: not for a crime or for any evildoing but for Christ my beloved Savior I found myself in these bonds again!

The propellers whirled as the engines revved up. The plane left the runway and headed south. Three hours later, we landed in Irkutsk. Then it was back to a police van, the prison, and searches.

GEORGI VINS

Through it all the Lord continued to preserve my little Gospel of Mark.

I spent several days in the prison at Irkutsk waiting to continue my journey. The men I had been traveling with had already been shipped to other prisons.

A few days later, I boarded a Stolypin train car with other prisoners from Irkutsk. The Stolypin was like a miniature prison on wheels. It had about eight cells with wire mesh walls. Each cage was built to hold eight prisoners, but as many as twenty-five men were crammed into the compartments. Armed soldiers stood guard in the corridor.



PRISON IN IRKUTSK, EASTERN SIBERIA

Although we had been searched before boarding the train, we went through it again. As soon as the train was in motion, we were called out, three to five at a time, to wait in the corridor to be searched.

Just ahead of me stood a small, frail old man. He started to strip.

THE GOSPEL IN BONDS

He tried to hurry but his hands trembled too badly. The soldiers yelled at him to move faster, which only made the old man more nervous. A soldier struck him with his fist. With a cry of pain, the old man slumped to the floor. There, with his shaky hands, he tried again to pull off his boots. Two young soldiers kicked him.

Being next in line, I saw everything. But what could I do? By Soviet law, I had no right to contradict a guard or even speak up for another prisoner. The young soldiers kept kicking that old man. My mind raced. *Should I keep silent? Look the other way? What about my Gospel? Maybe I'd have a better chance to preserve it if I said nothing.*

But what would Jesus do in my place? Would He be silent? Suddenly I spoke up. "What are you doing? Why are you beating him? He's old enough to be your grandfather! How can you treat someone like that?"

My reaction was so unexpected that even the guards were startled. Who was brazen enough to confront them? They stopped kicking the old man and turned to me.

"Don't you know the rules?" one of them yelled. "Nobody's bothering you!"

By now the old man had his boots off and was standing, but the soldiers had lost interest in him. "Get dressed!" they commanded.

One of them turned back to me. "Step up. Mr. Defender. Now it's your turn! We could put 'bracelets' on you, you know," he threatened.

The old man was taken back to his cage. I stripped quickly. One guard checked my clothing while the other went through everything in my bag. There he found a little box. He opened it. Inside was the tiny Gospel.

"What's this?" he asked with a sneer.

"It's the Gospel of Mark," I answered.

He started looking through it and then showed it to the other guard. "This is forbidden!" he announced and tossed it onto a pile of trash.

I immediately took the Gospel out of the garbage. "Throw it back!" shouted the soldier, his face flushed with rage.

“No!” I clutched it tightly in my palm.

The soldier forced my hand open and grabbed it. Holding it high over his head he started to tear it apart, sneering and mocking.

My mind raced. *Could I let him do that to God’s Word? No!* I snatched the Gospel from his hands. “This is God’s Word!” I said. “I won’t let you tear it apart!”

The soldiers were furious. Such open defiance was unheard of! The soldiers had the right to handcuff, put into a straitjacket, or even execute any prisoner who defied their authority. They could have shot me on the spot.

The prisoners still waiting to be searched silently held their breath in fear and anticipation of the horror they were sure to witness.

“I’m going to make you tear up that book with your own hands!” one of the guards snarled. “Then I’ll make you eat it!”

I gripped the little Gospel even tighter. “This book is my life!” I said, looking him straight in the eyes. “I’d rather be executed than tear it up!”

The convoy officer heard the commotion and ran into the search room. “What’s going on?”

The soldiers moved away from me and started to explain that I was being insubordinate and had almost started a riot against them. *How could I let the officer understand what was really happening?* Quickly I opened my hand.

“This is my Gospel,” I said, showing it to the officer. “It’s my life, my faith! These soldiers wanted me to tear it up. Because I believe in this book, I was sentenced to ten years in prison. I would never tear up this book.”

“Give it to me,” he said quietly.

“This is my Gospel,” I said, showing it to the officer. “It’s my life, my faith! These soldiers wanted me to tear it up. I would never tear up this book.”

THE GOSPEL IN BONDS

I handed the tiny book to the officer and he left the car. The soldiers continued searching me.

“Now you’re in for it!” one of them jeered. “He’ll teach you how to fight for your ‘rights!’”

My search was over and they went on to others. But I had to stand and wait for the officer. Everyone was certain that I would be severely punished because of that Gospel.

About ten minutes later, the officer returned. “This is your Gospel,” he said. “You can keep it.”

I thanked him. The soldiers looked confused. As I was taken back to my cage, the prisoners’ hands started reaching out. “Show us the Gospel!” they cried. One of them asked me to read it out loud.

“Let me take a little break first,” I answered. I closed my eyes and leaned back. *Oh, Lord, how I thank You for Your amazing intervention,* I prayed. Then I began reading the Gospel, first quietly and then louder and louder so that the prisoners in the next cell could hear about God’s love. The soldier who had kicked the old man and threatened to tear up my Gospel stood nearby, listening silently.

I recalled Stepan’s words: “Truth is defenseless, but it is also invincible.” Not only had the Lord preserved the little Gospel of Mark, but He gave me an opportunity to openly proclaim its truth.

