



Isaiah 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.

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Berean Banquet
September 11, 2015

LETTER FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Supporters of Berean Prison Ministries,

A Peoria elected official once said, "Berean Prison Ministries is one of the best kept secrets in town." His comment was intended as praise for the work that Berean has done and for the lives that have been changed through the work of our volunteers. However, after further reflection on that comment, we came to realize that the reason Berean is 'best kept secret' is that we have done a very poor job of communicating with our supporters about how God has been working through this ministry. To remedy this, we, as a Board of Directors, have made a commitment to improve our communication with you, and this newsletter is our first step in that endeavor. Our goal is to send out a newsletter update each quarter.

Another step we're taking towards better communication is a complete revamp of our website. Bereanprisonministries.org will be easier to use and will contain more useful information that will be updated on a regular basis. Please keep an eye out for those changes.

God has opened tremendous opportunities to minister to inmates and families in the US and internationally in Romania and Russia. Our newsletters will focus on various areas of these ministries and include stories of current or former inmates whose lives have been changed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our feature story in this newsletter covers the life and testimony of Bret

Unruh (you may remember him from the short testimony he gave at the Berean banquet last October) and how he went from a life of hopelessness and destruction to a life of hope in Christ.

As one of the founders of Berean Prison Ministries, Ed Meister would so frequently remind us, "this is the Lord's work," and it is about what He is doing in the lives of people who desperately need to know that God will remove their sins as far as the East is from the West when they commit their life to Him. Isaiah 61:1 says, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them are bound." Berean's goal is to help those in prison experience the liberty that only comes through Jesus Christ

Thank you for your past support, and we humbly ask for your continued financial support. We have also included a list of prayer requests. It is our hope that you will regularly lift this ministry to God in prayer.

Ken Hoerr
Chairman
Berean Prison Ministry Board of Directors

I KNEW I WAS BROKEN

God often works in mysterious ways. His work in Bret Unruh's life has been nothing short of miraculous.

When Bret Unruh found himself sitting in a Fulton County jail cell in May of 2010, it wasn't much of a surprise that his life had come to this. He had long since reached a point of complete resignation with his life; he no longer cared about his or anyone else's safety, so really it had only been a matter of time for him to end up in prison.

As hopelessness threatened to overwhelm him, his cell mate reached out. "Hey, man," he told Bret, taking in Bret's seven charges and the despair on his face, "it doesn't matter what it is, Jesus will take care of it." To Bret, his problems seemed too big for even Jesus to handle.

The downward spiral had been a long time in the making, all the choices and emotions from his childhood and adolescence building up to his incarceration. Bullying was a constant during his school years, having started at the age of 6, and the inability to defend himself fanned the flames of internal rage and frustration that would stick with him through adulthood. His parents' divorce around the age of 8 left him feeling like his life was out of control. Any sense of security in his life dissolved.

By the time he reached junior high school, he was looking for a way to escape his life. In 6th grade he turned to pornography. It became his world – a place he felt important, desirable, and, best of all, in control. He experimented with pot and was regularly smoking cigarettes by the time his 8th grade year came to an end.

As he entered high school, chaos consumed his life. Fights both at home and at school were frequent and resulted in discipline, setting him on a roller coaster of emotions; frustration and rage, followed by apathy and indifference. Alcohol developed into yet another escape, and before he graduated high school he was arrested for offenses from alcohol use. Life seemed meaningless and thoughts of suicide were prevalent.

His twenties were filled with substance abuse of alcohol and narcotics and multiple arrests. It was easier to place the blame on the others than it was to take responsibility and face his guilt. Eventually his guilt was a matter for the courts to decide. He was convicted for his crimes and sent to Fulton County Jail.

With the same feelings of defectiveness and worthlessness that had plagued him his whole life bearing down on him, Bret knew he had hit rock bottom. He knew he needed a change, so when his cell mate asked if he wanted to read the Bible, he agreed. Then he went to Sunday worship.

"As they started to sing 'Have Thine Own Way', I knew I was broken. At that time I decided I was going to accept the consequences of my actions, and seek God," Bret told those who attended the 2014 Berean Prison Ministry benefit dinner. He started to regularly read the Bible and then began to pray, asking God to help him deal with his emotions. He read the Bible, prayed, and wrote in a journal regularly.

The road was not easy. As Bret began seeking God his problems weren't immediately swept away. He was still battling his obsessive thinking and rapidly shifting emotions. In distress one night, he cried out to God asking Him to do something with his life, or kill him. "I could not



Bret now works as a welder in Springfield.

continue to go on living my life as I had been. At that first church meeting, I knew I was broken, but now I accepted my brokenness. My life had shown I was powerless and it was unmanageable. I told God I would do anything, or feel anything, if it meant I was going to be a better person.”

God answered Bret, reminding him of his promise to do anything or feel anything when he committed his life to Christ. He spoke to Bret, “...Think of my Son, Jesus, on the cross. Everything you are feeling right now - your hopelessness, your rejection, your isolation - He felt when he didn't have to, and He did it for you.”

That was the turning point for Bret. God's love coursed through him and it was as though the negativity was all washed away. “I found a new emotion and cried - not from sorrow or self-pity, but for the true joy of finding hope.” Bret was released from prison on house arrest parole in May 25, 2012. He still struggles, but by the grace of God he has been clean of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco for four years.

Bret Unruh is now an involved member of the Havana Church of Christ (HCC). His church has stood behind him and supported him through his struggles one hundred percent of the way. “It is not the church I grew up in... They are all about forming and building relationships,” Brett says. He uses his life experiences to help others in the HCC's Celebrate Recovery program, which is a Christian based recovery program. Bret also co-leads the men's ministry at his church and regularly attends meetings for Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. He also helps with Berean's Sunday morning worship services at Fulton County Jail where he was once incarcerated, and has a dream to get his church to partner with Berean Prison

Ministry to help with services and the mentoring program.

Bret's life is unrecognizable from what it was before he went to prison. He went to school for welding at MTI, and now holds down a full-time welding job in Springfield. Where thoughts of drugs and alcohol had consumed his life before, thoughts of Christ and a good work ethic now reside. God has truly worked miracles in Bret Unruh.

“Through the faithful members of Berean Prison Ministry, who were there to support, encourage, and foster my growing relationship with Jesus Christ, I say, ‘thank you,’” Bret expressed at the Berean benefit, then closed with Matthew 25:35. “For I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you cared for me, I was in prison and you visited me.”



Bret with two pastors and a friend from the Havana Church of Christ.

BEREAN'S FOOD & CLOTHING DISTRIBUTION

Berean Prison Ministries may be one of the best kept secrets in the Peoria area, but those who do know of Berean are generally only aware of the work Berean does in prison ministry. However, not many are aware of the work Berean Prison Ministries does in other areas, like food and clothing distributions. Berean operates a warehouse where donated food items, used towels and sheets from hotels, clothing, and refurbished bicycles are received. Most of the clothing and bicycles are sent to those in need in Mexico and Haiti where those items are most needed, while the donated food items are given to organizations in the Peoria

area supporting individuals in need, local jails, and the Illinois Department of Corrections.

The Illinois DOC calculated that in 2014 Berean Prison Ministries donated \$1.8 million of food items to them. Berean pays for the transportation costs of all of the donations, but it is a small price when so many people in need are being reached. Berean would have been unable to reach so many without the help of all those who made those donations. So to all those who donated, we cannot begin to express our gratitude in your willingness to give.

GLOBAL MINISTRIES: ROMANIA

Berean has seen a very rapid expansion of the Romania prison ministry that could only be accomplished by the hand of God. In the past ten years (half the time we've been working to get results in Russia) the ministry has expanded such that we now have approximately 5 times the volunteers holding services in 23 of their 42 prisons. The Romanian government has been incredibly supportive of Berean Prison Ministries in their country, going out of their way to ensure the Director of Prisons for the country and his staff meet with a Berean representative on each trip. These meetings not only keep the Romanian government appraised of Berean's ministry goals, but also keep ministry opportunities open in Romania.

Romania prisons work very differently to those in the States. In some of the Romanian prisons the inmates are able to accumulate points that allow them to spend as much a couple of weekends a year with their family members. These points are earned by working while in prison, good behavior, and attending various classes at the prison. Berean Prison Ministries is one of the only outside organizations that inmates can attend and receive points for doing so. With this system our volunteers have many more opportunities to speak of God's goodness to a much larger



audience of inmates, and we praise God for that. The following are a stories of some of the work in Romania:

During the Christmas service at the Margineni Prison the inmates were given a small gift by the volunteers. A disabled inmate, who has no contact with his family, broke down in tears thanking God and the volunteers for the gift. The man told the volunteers that he has lost a leg because of his past sins, but found Jesus Christ as his Savior. Praise the Lord!

The above picture is of Pastor Levente teaching inmates at the Jilava Prison to use a loom to make items they can sell on the outside. Pastor Levente's goal with the weaving classes is not just to teach the inmates to weave but to give an opportunity to help them understand God's will for their lives.

Pastor Baboi Marian works a night job and still makes time to take the bus to minister in a number of prisons for Berean. He reports a good start to the year with 30 inmates attending the services in the prison at Braila, 13 in Tichilesti, 11 in Tulcea, and 15 in Slobozia. We cannot help but feel humbled by the commitment and sacrifices of these dear brothers to serve God's kingdom.

Pastor Viorel Sintoiu pastors a church and for the past 8 years has been holding services at the prison in Codlea. He says that God overwhelmed him this year when 40 inmates asked to participate in the services he conducts. Management at the prison approved 24 applications so he now has a waiting list to join the services. Pastor Viorel said one inmate told him that he had taken a human life and asked how God could ever forgive a man like him. Viorel assured him that the blood of Jesus Christ can forgive every sin and every sinner. Viorel says, "I thank God for this beautiful work to which I was called."

We will provide you with a more detailed report on the ministry in Romania in our next publication after we have visited the country again in May.



LOCAL MINISTRY UPDATE:

TAZEWELL CO. JUSTICE CENTER

Sunday services at the Tazewell County Justice Center are running smoothly. Usually four to six volunteers go in Sunday morning at 8:00 AM for services. Of the 24 volunteers we currently have, six of them are song leaders and at least one is at every service. Depending on the setup for the day, we may hold one or two women's services, attended by four to ten ladies on average. The men's service is a two-hour service with between 15 to 30 men attending.

At the services we distribute daily reading and Bibles to those in need of them, then have an attendee open the service with a prayer. After the prayer we will sing four to six songs, allow some time for those wanting to give God praise, and pass out paper to receive prayer requests. Then one or two of the volunteers will share the word. During the men's service we also provide a Bible Study type setting for a separate POD.

We sing three to four songs at the end of the service, closing with another prayer given by an attendee. At the end of every service we are sure to thank each inmate for coming before we bid them farewell. We always want to be sure to let them know we genuinely enjoy getting to spend time and share the word of God with them.

We also provide Sunday afternoon, Tuesday morn-

ing, Wednesday evening, and Thursday morning times for fellowship and study. The prayer requests given by the inmates are typed up and emailed out to a group of dedicated individuals praying throughout the week for the inmates. The requests are also placed on the Berean Bulletin Board at the Morton Apostolic Church.

Countless stories could be told of what God has done, and is doing, but it is far more appropriate to hear from a few of the lives that have been touched.

"The Berean Prison Ministries has been a true blessing from God in my life! ...I have seen them sacrifice their personal time on many occasions in hope of helping others."

-Bryan R.

"The Berean Prison Ministries has been like a family to me and many others. ...They come to bring us hope in a sometimes hopeless situation. ...I appreciate the Berean Prison Ministries for having a service for the men that have lost [their] way."

-Monta A.

"I remember a time...when [I] first arrived at a facility in Fulton County that Berean ministered to. I remember how I felt then...alone, afraid, black inside, spiritually bankrupt. I had no idea where I was going, or how I was going to get there. From the moment I walked through the door of that first service Berean Ministries has made me feel welcome in a place that I never thought I could belong. Thanks to them, I now feel at home when I attend those services, and they are very much my family."

-Michael R.

FINANCIAL NEEDS

The Berean Prison Ministries Board of Directors is committed to being good stewards of all the resources God has entrusted to our care. Please consider how you might partner with us to bring the message of hope and freedom to those who desperately need to hear of God's forgiveness and love.

Ways to give: PayPal linked on the Berean website, or in the attached self addressed envelope.

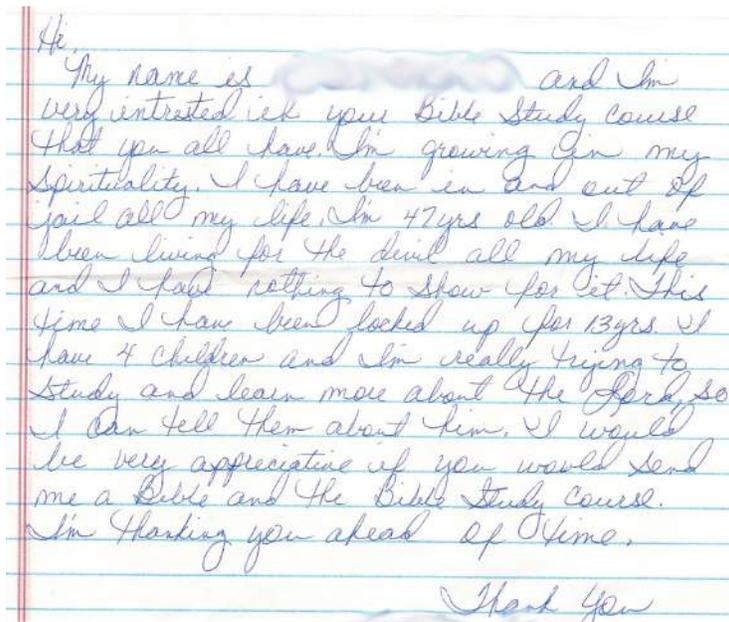
- Berean's postage costs have increased by \$25,000 in the past year as we mail Bibles and Bible studies to inmates.
- Berean receives donated food which is distributed to prisons, jails, and to organizations and individuals in need. We recently purchased a refrigerated truck to warehouse frozen items. The cost of the truck and the new refrigeration unit was \$6,000.
- Most of Berean's 50 volunteers in Romania lack the resources to purchase gasoline or bus fare to travel to the 23 prisons in which they serve. Berean spends approximately \$3,000 per month to provide for their expenses.

BEREAN

BIBLE STUDY PROGRAM

When Paul and Ed Meister started Berean Prison Ministries in 1996 they made a decision to give a Bible to any inmate at the Peoria County Jail who requested one. It may have not been a difficult decision at the time, as the Peoria County Jail housed only a few hundred inmates. However, as those inmates left the Peoria County Jail for other state or federal facilities they told other inmates that if they wanted their own Bible that Berean Prison Ministries would provide them one.

The word spread to other penal facilities, and today Berean receives approximately 2,000 letters each month from inmates all across the U.S. who write to request a Bible. With each Bible Berean sends the first three lessons from their Bibles study course with a return envelope and an agreement to send additional lessons as they are returned. Each month a host of Berean volunteers grade approximately 20,000 Bible study lessons. We thank God for the opportunity to give His word to the many inmates who write to us and for the many volunteers who support this work. The following letter is typical of the several thousand requests Berean receives each month



Hi,
My name is [name withheld] and I'm very interested in your Bible Study course that you all have. I'm growing in my spirituality. I have been in and out of jail all my life. I'm 47 yrs old I have been living for the devil all my life and I have nothing to show for it. This time I have been locked up for 13 yrs. I have 4 children and I'm really trying to study and learn more about the Lord, so I can tell them about him. I would be very appreciative if you would send me a Bible and the Bible Study course. I'm thanking you ahead of time.
Thank You

Hi,

My name is [name withheld] and I'm very interested in your Bible Study course that you all have. I'm growing in my Spirituality. I have been in and out of jail all my life. I'm 47 yrs. old. I have been living for the devil all my life and I have nothing to show for it. This time I have been locked up for 13 yrs. I have 4 children and I'm really trying to study and learn more about the Lord, so I can tell them about him. I would be very appreciative if you would send me a Bible and the Bible Study course. I'm thanking you ahead of time.

Thank you,

A Recipient of God's Love

PRAYER REQUESTS

The power of prayer is a remarkable thing and we see that power in work every day in the lives of those we minister to in prison and out. Here are some of our current prayers. We ask you to lend your prayers to ours -every additional prayer helps immensely.

- That God's kingdom would continue to be expanded in Romania as our team travels there in early May to meet with our volunteers, government leaders, prison wardens where our volunteers are serving, and the two gypsy churches Berean has helped to establish.
- For additional volunteers to serve in the 23 prisons where we are not now serving in Romania.
- For Pastor Levente and his family as he leads the prison ministry works in Romania for Berean Prison Ministries.

- Wisdom for our Board of Directors that our only goal would be the glory of God as we serve those in prisons.
- For additional volunteers in the Peoria area to help with the Bible distribution and Bible study program.
- For our approximately 250 volunteers serving in the U.S. that each would be faithful with all God has given us to do.
- For the inmates that attend church services each week that they would respond positively to the grace and mercy offered by our Lord and Savior.
- That more of the inmates in the jails and prisons would attend the voluntary church services each week.
- For our annual banquet to be held September 11, 2015.