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CONTENTS

Introduction—How Now Shall We Live? ix

P A R T O N E

WORLDVIEW: WHY IT MATTERS

- 1 A New Creation 3
- 2 Christianity Is a Worldview 13
- 3 Worldviews in Conflict 19
- 4 Christian Truth in an Age of Unbelief 27

P A R T T W O

CREATION: WHERE DID WE COME FROM, AND WHO ARE WE?

- 5 Dave and Katy's Metaphysical Adventure. 41
- 6 Shattering the Grid 51
- 7 Let's Start at the Very Beginning 57
- 8 Life in a Test Tube? 69
- 9 Darwin in the Dock 81
- 10 Darwin's Dangerous Idea 91
- 11 A Matter of Life 101
- 12 Whatever Happened to Human Life? 117
- 13 In Whose Image? 129
- 14 God Makes No Mistakes 141

P A R T T H R E E

THE FALL: WHAT HAS GONE WRONG WITH THE WORLD?

- 15 The Trouble with Us 147
- 16 A Better Way of Living? 151
- 17 Synanon and Sin. 169
- 18 We're All Utopians Now 175
- 19 The Face of Evil 187
- 20 A Snake in the Garden 193
- 21 Does Suffering Make Sense? 203

PART FOUR

REDEMPTION: WHAT CAN WE DO TO FIX IT?

22 Good Intentions. 217
23 In Search of Redemption 225
24 Does It Liberate? 231
25 Salvation through Sex? 237
26 Is Science Our Savior? 245
27 The Drama of Despair 253
28 That New Age Religion 263
29 Real Redemption 273

PART FIVE

RESTORATION: HOW NOW SHALL WE LIVE?

30 The Knockout Punch. 283
31 Saved to What? 293
32 Don't Worry, Be Religious 307
33 God's Training Ground 317
34 Still at Risk. 331
35 Anything Can Happen Here 345
36 There Goes the Neighborhood. 361
37 Creating the Good Society 373
38 The Work of Our Hands 383
39 The Ultimate Appeal 397
40 The Basis for True Science 419
41 Blessed Is the Man 431
42 Soli Deo Gloria 439
43 Touched by a Miracle. 455
44 Does the Devil Have All the Good Music? 465
45 How Now Shall We Live? 477

With Gratitude. 489
Notes 493
Recommended Reading 545
Index 561
About the Authors 573

C H A P T E R I

A NEW CREATION

In Ecuador, the peaks of the Andes jut more than two miles into thinning air. Within their cratered throat, the green incisor-shaped mountains hold the old colonial center of Quito, its ornate Spanish architecture surrounded by poured-concrete high-rises. Puffy clouds drawn through high mountain passes drift low over the city. Beneath them, banks of pink and white houses scatter like petals over the base of the mountains.

From the air, Quito is an exotic jungle orchid, appearing suddenly amid the foliage. But in its center is a place where the two forces vying for allegiance in the human heart become dramatically visible in an allegory of good and evil, heaven and hell.

In December 1995, I traveled to Quito with a group of Prison Fellowship friends to visit the deteriorating García Moreno Prison, one wing of which had been turned over to Prison Fellowship. We were met at the airport by one of the most remarkable men I've ever known: Dr. Jorge Crespo de Toral, the chairman of Prison Fellowship Ecuador.¹

Though now seventy-five, Crespo remains an imposing figure, tall and patrician, with silvery hair and ruggedly handsome features. Born into aristocracy and educated in the law, he seemed destined for a life of affluence and power. Instead, Jorge Crespo became a labor lawyer and took up the cause of the poor, battling the monopolies that enslaved the workers and filled the pockets of the ruling elite. He became so well known as the

champion of the poor that during one case an owner shouted at him, “So, Dr. Crespo, you are our guardian angel?” Indeed he was, although the industrialists were unwilling to admit it.

During Ecuador’s tumultuous transition from military rule to democracy, Jorge Crespo was twice arrested and imprisoned. But the democratic forces ultimately prevailed, and in the 1960s, he was selected to help draft Ecuador’s constitution. He was also a candidate in the nation’s first presidential election, finishing a strong third. In the midst of all this, Crespo found time to write and publish poetry as well as literary criticism, winning a well-deserved reputation as a writer and a statesman.

But it was not his literary or political accomplishments that drew me to Ecuador. By the time I met him, Jorge Crespo had forsaken a personal career in politics and was engaged in what he considered the most important task of his life: reforming Ecuador’s criminal justice system and its prisons.



I WILL NEVER forget the moment we arrived at García Moreno Prison in the center of Quito. The sights and smells are seared indelibly in my memory.

The prison’s white baroque bell tower hovers like an evil eye, while its heavy dome seems to be collapsing into the sprawling old building. Jorge Crespo elbowed his way through the ragged crowds clustered outside—families waiting in hope of a brief visit—and led us to the front entrance, a small doorway at the top of a few steps. On each side of the steps were huge mounds of garbage, decaying in the heat, and the putrid odor was nearly overpowering. The uneven steps were slippery in places, the top step splattered with fresh blood.

“Someone was beaten and then dragged over the threshold,” said Crespo, shaking his head. Such things were routine at García Moreno, he added.

We passed from the sun-drenched street into the dim, narrow passageways in the first section of the prison, known as the Detainees Pavilion, where Crespo pointed out several black, cell-like holes in the concrete walls. These were the notorious torture chambers. They were no longer in use—thanks to his work—but still they gaped there, grotesque evidence of their bloody history. Knowing that Crespo himself had twice been cast into this prison, I watched him, wondering what horrors this sight must bring to his mind. At one point his self-control slipped when he told us about a torture cell that was actually a water tank; prisoners had been kept there until

their flesh began decaying and sloughing off the bone—a means of extracting confessions.

As we moved along, we seemed to be descending into darkness, our eyes straining to make out the contours of the narrow passageways, until we came to a series of cells that were still in use. They were eerily illuminated by narrow shafts of light penetrating downward from tiny orifices high on the mold-covered limestone walls. From the walls of each cell hung four bunks, which were nothing more than iron slabs. Twelve inmates shared each cell, so the men had to sleep in shifts or stretch out on the floor, thick with grime and spilled sewage. There was no plumbing, and the air was fetid. Water was brought into the cells in buckets; when empty, these same buckets were filled with waste and hauled back out.

I was stunned. I've been in more than six hundred prisons in forty countries, yet these were some of the worst conditions I had ever seen. Worse than Perm Camp 35, one of the most notorious in the Soviet Gulag. Worse than prisons in the remotest reaches of India, Sri Lanka, and Zambia. Even more startling, the prisoners here had not been convicted of any crimes. The cells in the Detainees Pavilion were for men awaiting trial. In Ecuador, as in much of Latin America, there is no presumption of innocence nor any right to a speedy trial. A detainee can wait four to five years just to come to trial—and sometimes even longer if no one outside is agitating for his rights, knocking almost daily on some prosecutor's door, or paying off some official. There are palms to be greased at every level. In such a system, the poor are powerless, cast into dungeons and easily forgotten.

The guards urged us onward from the cells to a courtyard, where we could see inmates milling about in the open air. The yard was bounded by high-walled cellblocks and monitored by armed guards patrolling the parapets. As we gazed into the courtyard through a barred iron gate, the image was so surreal that I felt I had been transported to a scene of human desperation out of a Dickens novel. The men shuffled around the yard, many dressed in rags and wearing a vacant look of hopelessness on their pale, drawn faces.

A group of garishly made-up women huddling together against one of the walls caught my attention. "What are the women doing in there?" I asked Crespo.

"There are no women in García Moreno," he replied. "When we first started working here, the fathers sometimes brought their children in with them, even little girls, because there was no one else to take care of them. But now we have a home for the children."

Puzzled by his answer, I nodded toward the wall. “Over there. Those women.”

“Oh,” said Crespo. “Those are transvestites and male prostitutes. They usually stay together for protection from the other inmates.”

My heart sank. Truly this was a kingdom of evil. Hell on earth.

Crespo began talking with the official standing at the gate, and he appeared to be arguing with him. Finally Crespo turned to me, shrugged his shoulders and said, “I’m sorry. The guard says it’s impossible to enter the compound. Much too dangerous.”

“Tell him we insist, Jorge. Tell him the minister of justice promised us access.”

No doubt there was a bit of bravado mixed in with my adamant persistence, but I was certain that God had brought us here for a purpose. Crespo resumed his animated conversation with the guard until finally the man, shaking his head in disgust, unlocked the gate.

In the New Testament, Jesus described the gate into heaven as narrow, but this gate into hell was narrow as well. We could pass through only one at a time. Crespo stepped briskly into the yard before I could even collect my thoughts. My heart racing, I moved in behind him.

As we walked to the center of the compound, conversation ceased, and the inmates turned to watch us. I prayed a silent prayer for grace and started speaking. As I did, the men began shuffling toward us. Several were limping; a man who had only one leg had to be helped along by another prisoner. Directly in front of me was a man with an empty eye socket and open sores spotting his face. Several men had scarves covering most of their faces, perhaps to cover sores or to filter the vile smells.

Suddenly, despite the wretched scene before me, I felt the same freedom I’ve known thousands of times in the past years, whether in palaces, universities, or television studios—but especially in prisons. It is that special anointing God gives us to communicate his boundless love to even the most pitiful souls. I will never know who responded to the invitation to receive him that day, but afterward, scores of men reached out to us, many smiling. Yet no one broke the sacred canopy of silence, the sense of God’s presence, that seemed to settle over the courtyard.

As I shook hands or just reached out to touch the shoulders of the men clustered around us, I kept thinking of the time John the Baptist asked whether Jesus was the Messiah. “Tell him,” Jesus replied, that “the blind see, the lame walk, . . . and the Good News is being preached to the poor” (Matt. 11:4-5, NLT).

■ ■ ■

THE HOLY SILENCE held as the guards led us out of the yard and through heavy iron gates into another darkened corridor. Crespo told us that we were approaching the prison area that had been turned over to Prison Fellowship. We walked through a wide door and were ushered into a huge, triple-tiered cellblock.

All at once, we stepped out of the darkness and into a radiant burst of light.

“This is Pavilion C,” Crespo said proudly with a wide smile.

At the far end of the corridor was what looked like an altar, with a huge cross silhouetted against a brightly painted concrete wall. Gathered in an open area before the altar were more than two hundred inmates, who rose up out of their seats, singing and applauding. Some were playing guitars. All were glowing with joy and enthusiasm. Within seconds, we were surrounded, and the prisoners began embracing us like long-separated brothers.

In Pavilion C, Prison Fellowship volunteers and inmate leaders provided rigorous instruction in Christian faith and character development to inmates who were brought out of the other pavilions, including the Detainees Pavilion. Regular worship services were led by a variety of priests and ministers. This was a holy community, a church like none I had ever seen.

Yet Jorge Crespo was quick to point out that Pavilion C was only a stop on the way, a place of preparation. The ultimate destination was Casa de San Pablo (St. Paul’s House), so named because of Paul’s imprisonment in the Philippian jail (see Acts 16:22-34). This was a prison wing for those who had been received into full Christian fellowship and who ministered to the rest of the prisoners. Crespo hustled us on to see it.

Like Pavilion C, Casa de San Pablo was spotlessly clean, with the added beauty of tiled floors and separate dormitories, furnished with wooden bunks made by inmates. Beneath a flight of stairs, the inmates had partitioned off a small prayer closet containing only a bench with a cross on it. Because of the low ceiling, the men had to stoop down upon entering the room, then remain on their knees inside. The prayer closet was in use all day.

Pictures of Christ and other religious symbols were everywhere, and I momentarily forgot that we were in a prison. In fact, it wasn’t called a prison, but “the Home,” and it was populated not by prisoners but by “residents.”

The means by which the Home came into being is nothing less than miraculous. When Crespo first approached authorities about taking over a wing of the prison, these facilities were considered unfit even by García Moreno standards. The bright and airy main room where we now stood,

Crespo told us, was once scarcely more than a cave, dark and unlit, shrouded with spiderwebs. Once he got the go-ahead, however, Christian inmates and an army of volunteers from local churches went to work with shovels and tools. Tradesmen volunteered their services, as did local contractors. Many churches raised money. And overseeing it all was the tall, imposing figure of Jorge Crespo himself, the visionary who could see what others could not—a church inside a prison. It took several years of sweat and sacrificial labor—and no end of Crespo’s cajoling the officials—but eventually the vision became a reality.

That afternoon, as we assembled with residents in the meeting room, I noticed that the windows were barred on only one side: the side facing the main prison compound. The windows facing out to the street were open—a powerful symbol of trust and hope.

The meeting room was dominated by a huge mural, painted across the main wall by the prisoners themselves, depicting the emerging freedom of life in Christ. On the left, a ragged figure huddled in a blue shadow of despair. The next figure turned to the rising sun, and the next traveled toward it. Finally, a figure lifted his hands to heaven in praise of his Creator. The men in this room knew exactly what those symbols meant, for once they had been just like the men in the Detainees Pavilion, without hope and left to rot like garbage. But now they were new creatures in Christ.

As we worshiped together, several men gave stirring testimonies. “Coming to this prison is the best thing that ever happened to me,” said one man, who had been a high-ranking operator in a drug cartel. “I found Jesus here. I don’t care if I ever leave. I just want others to know that this place is not the end. There is hope. God can change us even here—*especially* here.”

The inmates included both Protestants and Catholics, but they drew no distinctions. Bible studies were led by Protestant ministers and by Father Tim, the resident Catholic chaplain. They loved the same Lord, studied the same Word. It was the kind of fellowship one longs for (but seldom finds) in our comfortable North American churches. Perhaps only those who have plumbed the depths of despair and depravity can fully appreciate the futility of life without Christ and can thus learn to love one another in the way Jesus commanded.

Father Tim summed it up best, speaking in his charming Irish lilt. “I never learned about God in seminary,” he said, embracing Jorge Crespo. “I learned about God through this man.”

We, too, had learned about God from this man and the transformation he had helped work in this place. From the time we entered García Moreno, we had not traveled far in physical terms—mere yards. But in spiritual terms

we had made a great journey: from the hell of the Detainees Pavilion to Pavilion C, an analogy of the church here on earth with its struggles, and then to the Home, a foretaste of heaven. A world transformed within a single building. It was nothing short of miraculous.



HOW WAS SUCH a miraculous transformation possible? It all began several years earlier as Jorge Crespo was leaving his career in politics. One Sunday at church, his wife, Laura, was moved by something the priest said in his homily.

“What if we really lived by what we say we believe?” she whispered to her husband.

Crespo smiled, for of late he had been pondering similar questions. And for the first time it struck him full force that his faith was not just a personal matter but a framework for all of life. Everything he did—his literary work, his political work, and his work on behalf of the poor—had to be motivated by God’s truth.

An opportunity to put his convictions into action came in 1984 when Javier Bustamante, the Prison Fellowship regional director, visited Quito and urged Crespo to begin a ministry bringing Christ to prisoners and reforming Ecuador’s criminal justice system. One walk through the Detainees Pavilion at García Moreno convinced Crespo. He was appalled by the filthy, inhumane conditions, by the darkness, hopelessness, and despair. Against the cautions of the authorities, he demanded entrance to some of the punishment cells, where the men quickly recognized him and surrounded him with pleas for help. Most had been there many months, some for years.

When he and Bustamante stepped out into the sunlit street, he said, “All right. I’ll lead the effort.”

Jorge Crespo’s great work had begun. He was sixty-one years old.

Crespo began by campaigning within the national legislature for criminal justice reform. In Ecuador the saying was “The wheels of justice grind slowly, and sometimes they need to be lubricated,” meaning most detainees had to bribe the judges just to see their cases come to trial. The judges reasoned that because they were underpaid, they deserved such rewards. But the legislature, noting the corruption, refused to vote the judiciary better salaries. Thus, those arrested found themselves in a catch-22, and those unable to pay the bribes simply languished in jail for years.

Crespo argued that the right to a speedy trial constitutes one of the hallmarks of democracy, and his persistent advocacy finally paid off when

legislation was passed to guarantee every detainee a trial within three years. (This law has yet to be consistently observed, but its passage gave prisoners throughout Ecuador a significant legal victory.) Yet his crowning accomplishment, as we have seen, was the creation of a prison based on Christian principles.

Pavilion C was a “spiritual boot camp,” preparing its residents for life in Casa de San Pablo, or the Home. And there were no guards within the Home; security was maintained exclusively by internal and external councils. Prisoners were allowed to leave the facility on temporary furlough passes for medical appointments or other urgent business; they also helped carry on the work in Pavilion C and among the prison’s general population. Crespo believed that the transforming power of Christ could so change former criminals that they would even accept responsibility for their own imprisonment.

But Crespo’s experiment was not without its opponents. Many of Ecuador’s “experts” in rehabilitation, the bureaucrats who ran the prison system, bridled at the unflattering comparisons now evident between Prison Fellowship’s work and their own. Furthermore, the guards who ran García Moreno’s black markets rebelled at having their day-to-day activities exposed to the Christian volunteers who constantly trekked into the place. How long would it be before their lucrative enterprises were exposed to something more than inadvertent scrutiny? As a result, the guards began harassing volunteers and confiscating supplies.

Trouble of this sort had been brewing since Crespo’s first efforts in the prison. But with the opening of the Home, the campaign to sabotage the work became far more aggressive.

In early 1995, guards greeted two residents of the Home, a Canadian and an Israeli, returning from a morning’s furlough granted for medical appointments, and marched them to the warden’s office. There, they were told that the Home had been closed and that they were being returned to the regular prison.

The two men were horrified. The warden suggested that they take the easy way out and simply leave. The men refused, demanding to see Crespo, but the warden grimly began filling out a form.

“I’m filing the report of your escape,” he said and had the two residents thrown out of the prison. The men had no option but to “escape.”

Within a short time a manhunt was underway. The Canadian and Israeli embassies were drawn into the matter, guaranteeing this would be no minor incident. But the warden’s real intent became clear when the police report named Crespo as an accessory to the escape, charging him with negligence for allowing the prisoners to leave. Hostile authorities took advantage

of the opportunity to suspend the in-prison ministry, threatening that the residents would be cast back into the Detainees Pavilion.

The warden had done his work well, and all the official reports lined up. It seemed to be an open-and-shut case.

Providentially, the testimony of a released inmate, a man who had been led to Christ by Crespo, created the first break in the solid phalanx of officials who were determined to scuttle the project and put Crespo behind bars. The inmate, it turned out, was a friend of a high government official, and word soon spread that Crespo was not implicated after all. Negotiations began with the police chief, the minister of government, and the prosecutors.

It was during those negotiations that I made the visit to García Moreno described earlier in this chapter. At that time Crespo told me that he fully expected to be sent to prison; yet not for a moment did he consider backing down, either in his human rights campaign or his ministry in the prison.

“I know why Jesus Christ lives among the poor,” he told the residents at the Home during those tension-filled days. “I know why he became poor in order to serve humankind. Only the poor are rich in mercy. Only the poor possess nothing—nothing but gratitude.

“Whatever happens, whether I am imprisoned once again, whether I am separated from my family as you have been, whether the work is damaged and we are separated from each other, we shall never be separated from the love of Christ. Neither height nor depth, nor any human power, can separate us from that love!”



IN THE END, the conspiracy to destroy Crespo’s work and put him behind bars was exposed, and in May 1997, all charges against him were dropped. And in the years since our visit, García Moreno Prison has become an even more striking parable of God’s kingdom at work in the midst of a fallen world. Although guards and government officials continue to harass Crespo (the work was even suspended for a second time), enormous progress continues to be made.

By nurturing the flower of justice in what was once the most evil of gardens, by living out the reality of being a new creation in Christ, Jorge Crespo has helped to create a whole new world for others. And the forces of hell are being conquered by the power of heaven.