



Giving thanks always

for all things to God the Father in
the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 5:20

November 2025 Newsletter

Dear Friends,

We at Set Free would like to wish you and your loved ones a very special and blessed Thanksgiving! Thank you for taking time during this busy season to read this letter.

To begin with, I would like to share a special article with you—one that tells my life story, the Lord’s leading, and the history of Set Free, along with our current outreaches. Anneliese Rider, a writer from Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Illinois, conducted the interview and authored the article, which was published in July of this year. We felt this was the perfect time to share it with you, as Set Free celebrated its 55th anniversary this September.

**With God, all things
are possible.** Matthew 19:26

Building the Church Behind Prison Walls

Phil Wagner—together with Today in the Word—has reached thousands of inmates with the hope of the gospel and biblical truth.

by Anneliese Rider

“Everything that I tried for happiness was just like the kid chasing soap bubbles,” Phil Wagner, founder of [Set Free Prison Ministries](#), says.

Phil has been sharing the gospel with prisoners for more than 50 years. Looking back, the 84-year-old sees that his childhood—complicated by divorced parents, “crazy, stupid” choices, and a fruitless search for happiness—prepared him for this. “Everything that had happened in my life was God’s schooling to fit me for what was going to be my full-time life: prison work,” Phil says.

“My heart is for those people who are considered the armpit of society.”

‘Chasing soap bubbles’

Phil Wagner’s mom divorced his dad when Phil was 11. Phil was heartbroken. He fell in with a group of other kids from broken homes and started doing “crazy, stupid things.” Seven years later, when Phil found his father dead from a heart attack, his attempts to heal the pain became adult-sized: buying fast cars, drag and street racing, winning trophies, starting his own trucking business,

entering a teenage marriage that would not last, and fathering two kids. He even tried church and decided that his tithing and good works earned him salvation.

But nothing gave him the happiness he longed for, and when a childhood friend returned to Phil's neighborhood in Northern California, Phil had a realization while talking to him. "I said, 'You got something in your life that I don't have in my life. I want to know what it is,'" Phil recounts. They started attending his friend's church, and soon Phil realized that his good deeds wouldn't get him to heaven. "I was under so much conviction," he says. "It was either I was going to walk out and never go back to church, or I was going to try and find out the answers to my questions." He chose to find the answers.

A heart for the imprisoned

When he finally accepted God's gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, Phil became passionate about sharing the gospel with everyone. In 1966, he enrolled at Emmaus University (then Emmaus Bible School) and moved from California to Chicago to get the training to become a missionary.



Once there, he was assigned a practical service outreach to help counsel inmates at Cook County Jail.

1971 – Phil appointed as official staff Protestant Chaplain at Chicago's infamous Cook County Jail.

In 1971 he took over the chaplaincy at Cook County Jail. He preached on Sunday mornings, counseled inmates, trained other chaplains, informed prisoners when a loved one had died, trained Moody students in prison ministry, and shared the gospel as often as possible. But his main goal in everything was to show the inmates that Jesus always loves them.



1994 – Delegation of Moscow and Saint Petersburg prison officials visits California, sponsored by Set Free

"I'd listen to these young people, and I'd have to bite my tongue or my cheek," Phil says. "If there would have been one person in the world that cared about this young man, he'd never, never, ever be there." Later in 1971, Phil established Set Free Prison Ministries, a non-profit ministry for inmates, and began to distribute Bible courses in Cook County Jail. "If you can put it in their hand . . . they can sit there and read it until it finally sinks in," Phil says.

After eight years as a chaplain, Phil began sensing a calling to establish prison ministries in more locations. He moved back to California and started setting up inmate correspondence ministries on the West Coast and around the United States.

1993 – Moscow prison warden signs an official contract granting Phil legal permission to minister in Moscow's prisons

'Get on the airplane'

In 1993, Bud Suhl, a former inmate who'd been pardoned by the governor of California, called and invited Phil to visit Russia. Phil responded that he didn't have the money. Through connections with the Salvation Army, Phil and Set Free Prison Ministries gained access to sharing Bibles and Christian literature in Russian prisons. "Bud said, 'If God wants you to go to Russia, all you got to do is get on the airplane and say, 'Thank You, Jesus!' Now do you want to go, or don't you?'"

Phil agreed to go, but not for tourism—all he wanted to do was visit the prisons, a seemingly impossible request. For the past 70 years of atheistic communist rule, it had been illegal to have any contact with Russian prisoners. But through connections with the Salvation Army, Phil and Bud ended up in the warden's office at the Butyrka prison in Russia, preparing to go inside and talk to the inmates.

When the warden told them they weren't allowed to give the prisoners anything, Bud had his answer ready. "Do you want your prisoners to continue to be coming back to prison?" Bud asked the warden. "They need to get the Bible, or their lives are never going to be changed. Now, do you want to see their lives changed, or don't you?"





1993 – Distributing literature and sharing the gospel in a women’s cell in Moscow.

The warden relented, giving them permission to hand out gospel material, and Phil became the first person to preach the gospel in Russian prisons in over 70 years. What started as a short-term mission trip turned into a 15-year stay in Russia and Kazakhstan, as Phil set up prison ministries across both countries.



1993 – Phil began serving in Saint Petersburg Russia, “Prison of the Crosses”.

When political turmoil forced him to leave, he returned to California in 2007, where he continued his prison ministry and, in 2013, married his wife, Serena.

Joining with Today in the Word

In 2016, Moody’s Today in the Word team contacted Phil and asked if Set Free Prison Ministries would partner with Moody to distribute Today in the Word to inmates.

“With rapidly increasing prison regulations, it became more and more difficult to get the resources to the men and women who needed them,” says Jamie Janosz, managing editor of Today in the Word. “Phil’s organization takes a highly personal approach, ensuring that the deliveries are made in a way that can be accepted.”

Set Free Prison Ministries delivers Bible-centered materials to inmates in the US and around the world. Now, Moody ships pallets of the next month’s issue of Today in the Word to Set Free Prison Ministries in Southern California. There, Phil’s team—a small group of employees and over 100 volunteers— removes the staples, inserts the issues in envelopes, sends enrollment cards, and keep track of where inmates are located so they can consistently receive Today in the Word. The inmates who receive Today in the Word prize the deep theological teaching and discipleship. “You know, they come to know the Lord, but how do you defend the faith? How do you have your questions answered? How do you grow in grace and knowledge?” Phil says. “And for all those questions Today in the Word is just powerful, and they love it.” When Phil accepted the responsibility for distributing Today in the Word into prisons, there were 1,000 issues going to prisoners every month.

2025 – Set Free team preparing Today in the Word

Now, more than 4,500 issues are delivered monthly. Instead of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task, Phil is delighted at how many people are reading and learning about Jesus through the ministry. “Today in the Word shares the gospel. It handles the tough questions and gives you a basis for your faith, and it talks about eternal security and Christ being the only way to heaven,” Phil says, explaining how countless inmates have been transformed by the gospel. **“God is building His church behind prison walls.”** A.R.



Phil Wagner in front of the Set Free office, 2025

We are deeply honored to partner with Moody Bible Institute in sending out “Today in the Word.” They are truly a renowned, world-class Bible institute. We have been blessed to enjoy a close relationship with them dating back to 1971. We continue to be blessed with so many wonderful opportunities to share the gospel with the unsaved and assist with the spiritual maturity of the many new believers. Over the past 54 years we’ve been privileged and blessed to share the gospel with tens of thousands of inmates on three continents. We have distributed many hundreds of thousands of Bible Courses, Bibles, Christian books, and literature.



Amazingly, everything—including mailing and return postage—was provided completely free of charge. Every day we continue to operate is truly a miracle of the Lord’s faithfulness and His provision through His loving and compassionate people.

It’s no wonder we continue to emphasize that Set Free is 100% the Lord’s ministry! All glory goes to our loving God and Savior. We are truly thankful to the Lord for each of you who partner with us in furthering the gospel, and for every prayer that ascends to the “Throne of Grace” on behalf of this ministry.

We are grateful to the Lord for His loving people who financially support Set Free. Your generosity keeps us operational, allows the gospel to continue flowing, and leads to lives being wonderfully changed for time and eternity. Each month, we continue to minister to nearly 6,000 inmates, many of whom are destitute, and we receive over 800 new enrollments. The prison mission field is truly “white unto harvest.”

To date, 1,289 inmates have made professions of faith while completing their Bible courses. To our loving God be all the glory!

As the ministry continues to grow, so do its expenses. Would you please join us in prayer that we will be able to finish 2025 in the black? With God, all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).

May our Lord pour out His wonderful blessings upon you and your loved ones. We truly appreciate you, and once again, we wish you a very blessed Thanksgiving!

Because He lives



Phil Wagner

Psalm 103



Thank you, Set Free Prison

Ministries, for keeping up with me. I failed to obey God’s commandments and did not listen to Him. That is why I am now locked up in jail, waiting for trial. I am a foreigner in this country, from Palau. I have lost my family—my wife and my children. I cannot change the past, but I believe God has given me one last chance.

I am determined never to turn away again and to use my testimony to bring people to Christ Jesus. Please pray that I may be deported back home, so I can help save future generations. I ask for total forgiveness from God for all I have done. I am nothing without You, Heavenly Father. **Jasper / Santee, California**

LETTERS FROM INMATES

I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU CAME TO ME.
MATTHEW 25:36



Thank you for this Bible study; it encourages me to dig deeper into my Bible and reflect on myself as well. I may not have answered every question correctly, but I did search for the answers in my Bible and read each lesson. I seek God in His word, and I am working on changing my attitudes and behaviors daily. I am changing my perspective on everything and striving to see things as God sees them—through His eyes.

I do everything to please Him, not others. I desire His will to be done, not my own, and I am learning to be still and know that He is God. **Angela / Indianapolis, Indiana**



I want to take a moment to thank you for all that you do—for sending me Bible studies, for taking the time to grade them, for writing notes, and for spreading the love of Christ.

I became a Christian on May 1, 2025. What you do has been a big part of my transformation, keeping me rooted in the Bible and helping me gain more and more Bible knowledge that uplifts me spiritually. You are in my prayers, and I sincerely thank you. **Pedro / Wichita, Kansas**

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You may also donate online. <https://www.setfreeprisonministries.org/give/>

