

The Prisoner

The prison chaplain waited as a guard unlocked the cell door. The remains of the condemned man's last meal were waiting for someone to take them away. Steak, as usual. Most men asked for steak. Surprisingly, this prisoner had finished the meal. Most were too nervous to eat on the final day. The guard opened the door, and the chaplain stepped into the cell. He heard the door lock behind him.

"Hello, Padre" the prisoner said casually.

"You asked to see me," the chaplain answered without emotion.

"Yeah, I thought maybe we could have a little talk."

"Do you wish to make a confession?" the chaplain asked.

"I've already confessed," the prisoner replied. "I told the judge I killed the little girl. That's what got me here."

"I'm talking about a confession before God. Do you want to ask God to forgive your sins?"

"I don't know that I've committed any sins that require forgiveness."

The chaplain was confused and upset by this answer. He tried not to get angry. His job was to minister to the spiritual needs of the prisoners, not to judge them. For some reason, though, he found himself intensely disliking this man. For a moment he wondered if the man was insane. But he had read the psychiatrist's evaluation. The prisoner was fully competent, exceedingly intelligent, and showed absolutely no remorse for his actions.

The chaplain kept the anger out of his voice when he responded. "I think the murder of that girl constitutes a grievous sin in God's eye."

The prisoner waved the chaplain to sit down on the wooden chair in his cell. "I asked for you because I wanted to talk, not because I wanted forgiveness. We talked when I first got here, and you struck me as an intelligent man. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your religion."

The chaplain hesitated for a moment, and then sat down. It was an unusual request, but if there was a chance he could get through to this evil man it was worth it. It was never too late to save a soul.

"Do you believe in an all-powerful God?" the prisoner asked.

"Yes, I do."

"A God who can see into the future? Who knows what's going to happen beforehand?"

“Absolutely.”

“Do you believe that humans have free will? That we can choose what we will or will not do?”

“Yes. Of course. We can choose to follow God’s will and do good, or we can choose to disobey God and do evil.”

“How can God know what the future will be if we have the free will to change it?”

“We have free will to make choices, but God knows what our choices will be.”

“I think you’re playing word games,” the prisoner said. “If God knows what my choice will be, it seems to me it’s predestined. I really don’t have a choice, do I?”

“You have the choice,” the chaplain answered. “The fact that God knows what you’ll choose doesn’t mean you don’t have the choice.”

“But if I don’t make the choice God expects, it means God’s vision of the future was wrong. And that can’t be, so that option never really existed. What kind of a choice is that?”

The chaplain stared at the prisoner without answering.

“Do you believe God created me?” the prisoner asked.

“Absolutely.”

“So, he created me knowing I would kill that girl.”

Again, the chaplain stared without answering.

“Why would God do that? Could it be that *he* didn’t really have a choice? That it was predestined, the way I was predestined to kill that girl?”

“God is in control,” the chaplain insisted.

“And a strange sort of control it seems to be. He created that little girl, Tabby I think her name was, knowing that she was destined to be killed by me.”

“Tammy,” the chaplain hissed. “Her name was Tamara.” He felt rage boiling within him. The prisoner must have heard the girl’s name dozens of times during the trial. Why was he pretending he didn’t know it? Was he trying to get ‘the chaplain’ to show anger?

“Whatever,” the prisoner said dismissively. “Since God knew I would kill her when he created me and when he created her, it seems to me that I was just doing God’s will when I strangled her. Don’t you agree?”

Suddenly the chaplain’s anger was replaced with a cold fear and loathing. His intuition told him who he was dealing with. “I always wondered if you really existed,” he said.

The prisoner’s face brightened. “So, you’ve figured it out. I knew you were a smart one when I first met you. It doesn’t change anything we’ve talked about, though. God created the world in, what was it, six days? And he saw that it was good, right? So why did he feel the need to create me?”

“It is not for me to question the ways of God” the chaplain answered.

“That’s a cop out,” the prisoner answered. “If you wondered whether or not I really existed, then you must have questioned some of the other things you read in the Bible. Why not all of it? Why would God deliberately create a flaw in his otherwise perfect universe?”

“Get thee behind me!” the chaplain commanded.

The prisoner looked deflated and shook his head. “I’m disappointed in that answer,” he said. “I was hoping for something intellectual. What did you expect me to do? Quiver with fear and crawl behind you? Disappear in a cloud of red smoke? If you want me to be behind you, you’ll have to turn around. Don’t take the words of Jesus and use them in vain.”

The chaplain stared at the prisoner without speaking.

“Ahh yes, Jesus.” the prisoner continued. “The only begotten son of God who came down to Earth for our salvation. Sounds a little Earth-centric, don’t you think? What about the millions of other intelligent life forms throughout the Universe. Are they to be denied salvation? Or did God send sons to their planets, too. Oh, wait. There was only one son, and he died on Earth. Well, maybe he sent daughters. It’s just all so confusing.”

“How many millions of men and women on this planet have you led astray with talk like this?”

“Actually, none.” the prisoner confided. “I just show them their options and let them choose? You see, unlike you I believe in free will. And you’d be surprised how many choose the option that gives them immediate gratification. You really are a weak species with more than a touch of inherent evil. You really don’t need me to lead you astray.”

“And do those who choose evil regret that choice when they’re burning in Hell?” the chaplain asked.

“Oh, do you believe in Hell?” the prisoner asked. “Do you really think a loving God would condemn people for eternity? He knew what they would do when he created them, so they didn’t have any choice in the matter, did they? Why condemn them for something they couldn’t control?”

The chaplain said nothing, so after a brief pause the prisoner continued. "Actually, Hell's not such a bad place. Not when you're in charge, anyway."

A metallic clang announced the unlocking of the outer door to the cell block. The warden entered, flanked by several guards. The chaplain couldn't help but smile slightly as he said, "I believe you're about to find that out for yourself."

"Don't worry about me," the prisoner replied dismissively. "I've been around for a long time. I'll be back. Maybe I'll adopt a woman's body next time. They're always fun, and it catches a lot of people off guard."

The prisoner willingly left the cell with the guards and the chaplain followed. He tried to make sense out of his visit to this prisoner. He had come to the cell to try to save a man's soul. Instead, he found a creature that, as far as he knew, was not a man and might not even have a soul. Oh well. He was just doing his job. But now he was confused, and he had doubts about things he'd never questioned before.

It occurred to him that the prisoner was just doing his job, too.