



# Reviews

**RESTORATIVE HOPE: CREATING PATHWAYS OF CONNECTION IN WOMEN’S PRISONS**, by Sarah F. Farmer, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2024. 205 pages. \$29.99

*Restorative Hope* begins with a helpful preface and introduction that gives insight into what this book is offering to readers—an expansion of the definition of hope and tools for learning communities. Farmer’s work is rooted in her lived experience of having a family member who was incarcerated and her work teaching inside of a prison for over a decade. This kind of rooting makes for a book that offers ideas for pedagogy, practical theology, and continued opportunities for research. Farmer’s personal and professional experience make this book an informative and challenging read.

As a chaplain who works with both men and women in Minnesota state prisons, I was excited to read a book that elevated the wisdom of folks who are incarcerated. While it is tempting to just linger in the personal stories that come from those who are justice-involved, Farmer limits her book to the subject of hope and how hope is more than a “disembodied theory.” At times, the book reads like a research journal, but more often, the book offers insights into profound experiences, education about incarceration, and a deep reflection on why hope is transformative.

Chapter 1, *Hope in Crisis*, is an exploration into the carceral system and the barriers and harm that take place inside of prison and once someone has left. Hope is seen as connected to life and what is happening in our lives affects hope. This chapter is a book in its own right and leaves ample opportunity for questions about how society deals with incarceration as well as wrestling with what church leaders are teaching people about who God is.

Chapter 2, *Building Resilience*, begins the journey into the stories of women who can share about resilience or the fortitude and strength it

takes to remain hopeful in an incarcerated setting. Choosing to remain hopeful and unwilling to see oneself as helpless is necessary in a prison, not just for survival, but to try to find flourishing. Farmer ties together hope and resilience in a way that reminds me of the story of Rahab and the hope it would take to drop the red cord out of the window. The hope embodied by Rahab and the hope described by Farmer emerge from enduring suffering and harnessing creativity, without any assurance that everything will turn out well.

Chapter 3, *Nurturing Connection*, begins with interdependence and expands on how proximity and relationship are critical to hope. Imagining what happens to people who spend time in solitary confinement or isolation helps us to understand why Farmer is making this important connection. This chapter also begins to reveal the difficulties of what is experienced at church versus a relationship with God. A challenge for those inside of the church to evaluate if they can see incarcerated people as accepted, loved, and worthy. Is the church a place where they can find support and a community that will witness and advocate on their behalf? Connections with institutions, family, and community are not just about empathy or compassion, but rather these connections are core to changing lives and systems.

Chapter 4, *Overcoming Identity Paralysis*, is my favorite chapter in the book as it reveals one of the hidden costs of incarceration: the stripping of identity. For Christians, this chapter is an invitation and challenge to explore how we teach, practice, and talk about sin, punishment, and justice. Farmer highlights the strength and skills that women who are incarcerated develop to survive and find restoration as a place of learning for those who have not experienced incarceration.

Chapter 5, *Theological Teaching In Prison*, left me with mixed feelings. Farmer emphasizes the significance of incorporating critical race and womanist pedagogies, as well as elevating marginalized voices, in education, but in doing so, she also narrates a troubling activity concerning suicide. While Farmer's reasoning and purpose seemed to yield creative and theologically interesting results, a discussion on suicide inside of a prison is a complex undertaking and should be supported by therapeutic prison staff as the women could face additional restrictions or be triggered by the activity. The suggestions on pages 177–179 are the gift to the church and should be explored and discussed in every congregation.

The name of the book feels a bit misleading if you are hoping for a guide to creating pathways of connection to women who are incarcerated and giving them hope. This book instead offers a way of looking for and

finding hope that is restorative via the lived experiences of women who have been incarcerated. I would recommend this book to church and ministry leaders and anyone interested in justice or supporting people who are justice-involved.

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