

Text: Acts 16:16-25

“The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened.”

Introduction –

A couple of months ago, the Cleveland Cavaliers basketball team made a miraculous comeback in the NBA Finals, to win the championship. They made history: no other team has ever rallied, after being down three games to one in a best of seven series, to win game seven of the finals. It was an amazing battle that went down to the wire. As the final seconds ticked from the clock, an emotional scene broke forth on the court. Players dropped to their knees, weeping tears of joy. Others hugged each other holding their hands high in the air. They had finally accomplished what they had set out to do. In other seasons they had come so close, but always came up short. This time they managed to bring the championship trophy home. The whole city of Cleveland erupted that night in triumphant celebration. I have a friend who lives there, and he was watching the game on TV with the windows open, and he said he could hear the whole neighborhood shouting and people were rejoicing in the streets.

That is the kind of response that comes naturally for us when something wonderful has happened in our lives. We rejoice. Our hands reach into the air and we shout for joy.

As Christians, we celebrate because God is good, and worthy to be praised! He pours out His blessings, into our lives, in so many ways. When we see the hand of God working in powerful ways worship seems to come naturally for us. But is worship only for the good times, when things are going our way? What about when things are difficult, in moments of sorrow, as we wrestle with the trials and tribulations of this world, what then? Can we still worship God even when we find ourselves in a dark and desperate place?

Paul and Silas were confronted with that question in our passage. In Acts 16, the apostle Paul was traveling across the Roman Empire, on his second great missionary journey. The Lord had been doing all kinds of amazing things along the way. People were being saved, lives were being changed, churches were being planted, and the gospel was making an impact in the world. There were so many wonderful reasons to rejoice. But when the missionaries came to the city of Philippi they ran into intense opposition.

The trouble started when they met a slave girl who was possessed by an evil spirit. Her cruel masters found a way to exploit her sad condition, and they put her to work as a fortune teller.

Apparently people were willing to pay good money to for any kind of encounter with the spiritual world. She followed the missionaries around town, and disrupted their preaching. Finally, Paul turned to the woman and commanded the spirit to depart in the name of Jesus. Immediately she was liberated from her demonic oppression. It was a wonderful thing, but her masters were not enthusiastic when they learned that their business, as spiritual consultants, was no longer going to be bringing in a profit. They dragged Paul and Silas before the local the authorities where they were arrested, beaten, and then thrown into prison.

How would the missionaries respond? They had two options: they could either allow themselves to sink into despair, becoming bitter and resentful, or they could draw close to the Lord and continue to praise His name.

These are the same choices we have today, when we encounter various trials in our lives. We can't always see the hand of God working, when troubles come. We know that we're supposed to trust in the Lord, but that's not easy to do when it feels like our world is falling apart. We could allow ourselves to sink into a pit of despair, and pushing everyone away, including the Lord. But these are the moments when we need Him the most. We need Him every hour of every day, how much more in times of adversity. But we don't have to give into to despair, we can call out to God, allowing Him to transform our dark and desperate circumstances into a sanctuary of praise.

I want to look at both of these responses, this morning, and see what the Lord can accomplish when we draw close to Him in worship.

1. In times of trouble, many choose to push God away.

Paul and Silas could have reacted to their circumstances in this way. They had plenty of reasons to be discouraged, and no one would have blamed them if they had thrown themselves a pity party in that prison cell. They had been falsely accused, and were beaten with rods. They were publically humiliated; not only had they been thrown in jail, but their ankles were chained to the stocks. There was no bed or pillow on which to rest their head; they had to do their best get comfortable on the cold and dirty floor. This would have only magnified the throbbing pain still resonating from their wounds. One commentator writes, "It was not the jailer's business to take any thought for his prisoner's comfort, but to make sure that they did not escape. He was possibly a retired soldier, and while service in the Roman army developed many fine qualities, these did not include the milk of human kindness." (*Bruce, F.F. NICNT p.315-317*)

Needless to say, this had not turned out to be a very good day. If you're a missionary, you don't plan for things to go this way. All they were trying to do was help people, and this was the thanks they got in return. Paul and Silas could have looked at each other and complained, "Life isn't fair! If we ever get out of this mess, we're calling it quits and going home."

That wasn't their response, as we will see in a few minutes, but we've probably been there, a time or two. When you are having that kind of day, it can really put a damper on your attitude. We might begin to complain, and feel sorry for ourselves. Pretty soon, we become bitter and resentful. It's like we're sinking in quicksand, the more we flail about the quicker we're pulled

under. We may even find ourselves tempted to direct our frustration toward God, asking: “Why are you doing this to me?” “How could you this happen?” “It isn’t fair, I’ve tried to be faithful, shouldn’t that count for something?” We forget that God isn’t the cause of the bad things that happen in our lives. We live in a fallen world, and sin has wreaked all kinds of havoc in creation. That why people treat one another so poorly at times; its why we struggle with sickness and disease.

I’m reminded of the Job’s wife, in the OT. When bad things started happening in their lives, she said to her husband,

“Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!” He replied, “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.” (Job 2:9–10, NIV84)

In those moments, we are tempted to run away from God or to become angry with God, but what we really need is to run towards God and to find comfort in His presence

It’s like a child who falls down when, when he is playing, and skins up his knee. It is bleeding a little, and it hurts, and his mom tries to comfort him, and asks if she can take a look at it. She has some ointment that might help take a little bit of the sting away, or if nothing else her hugs can bring much needed comfort. But he cries, “no, it hurts, I don’t want you to touch it,” and he turns away.

Don’t turn away from the Lord in times of trouble, go to Him in the midst of your heartache and sorrow, and allow Him to minister to you. The Bible tells us that He is the God of all comfort. Just being held in His arms of mercy is a powerful thing. The book of psalms is full of prayers from the weary and the downcast reaching out to the Lord. He didn’t always take away their problems, but He always met them in the darkness and

One response is to push God away, but there is a better choice...

2. In times of trouble we need to praise God, despite our circumstances.

Paul and Silas didn’t spend the evening grumbling in their prison cell. Instead, verse 25 reads, “...about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them...”

A strange and unusual sound began to echo through the hallways of the jail. The others prisoners were used to groaning and cries of anguish, but this was something else, they had probably never heard before. Hymns of praise rose up towards heaven. Paul and Silas didn’t need musical accompaniment, or songbooks. They simply lifted their voices to God. These were not defeated men. They were afflicted, but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed (2 Cor. 4:8-9). Who would have thought this dark and dingy place could ever become a sanctuary for worship? It was possible, because they kept focus on their Savior, Jesus Christ. True, they had been treated unfairly, but

the Lord had not abandoned them. Yes, these were not ideal circumstances, but God was still good.

How is it possible to worship in times of trouble? By remembering who God is: He is still faithful, no matter what we're going through. He is still with us, no matter where we are. He is still working, even if we cannot see what He's doing. He is still holding us in His arms of love, and won't ever let go.

That is reason enough to sing His praise. Worship doesn't need to depend on our circumstances. Our circumstances changes, but the Lord remains the same. The passage reminds us that we can pray to God and worship Him anywhere. You don't have to be sitting in a church. There doesn't need to be stained glass windows in the background. There doesn't have to be music playing in the background. If these missionaries could hold a worship service in prison, we can do the same whatever our surroundings might be.

Worship has a way of renewing our perspective. It places our focus on the God rather than our struggles. He is the one who calms the storms, conquers armies, and raises the dead. When we remember that, our problems don't seem quite as daunting.

Without my glasses, I don't see things clearly. Everything is a blur. If I were to get up in the morning and forget to put them on my face, I would be stumbling around the house, and wouldn't make it very far. There may be times when Sunday rolls around, and you come stumbling into church, after having a tough week. When the music starts, you can barely mouth the words. But something changes inside, as the songs makes its way to your heart. All of the sudden, the world doesn't seem quite so dark, because you see the light of Christ shining. And the burdens you've been carrying aren't quite so heavy, because you realize that you're not carrying them alone. It's not that your circumstances have changed. When you leave, you're going back into the world, and those struggles will still be there. But you are able to see things differently, after spending time in the presence of God.

Psalm 63:5-8 says,

I will praise you with songs of joy. I lie awake thinking of you, meditating on you through the night. Because you are my helper, I sing for joy in the shadow of your wings. I cling to you; your strong right hand holds me securely." (Psalm 63:3-8, NLT)

3. God can accomplish great things when we draw close to Him in praise.

Paul and Silas made an impact on the other prisoners. Some probably thought they were crazy, but others must have been touched. Some of those tough and hardened men discovered hope for the very first time. They might have given up, a long time ago, but a spirit of praise can be contagious. And they weren't the only ones touched by the hope of the gospel that night.

The passage goes on to tell, in verse 26, that as the missionaries were singing:

“...suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!” And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”” (Acts 16:26–31)

The missionaries had no idea, when they had started out that morning that we were going to wind up in prison. They had no idea that they would wind up having the opportunity to minister to a bunch of inmates, or lead the jailer and His family the Lord. But God knew.

All we see is the broken the pieces, but God sees opportunities that we would have never planned. We never know who is watching, or listening, and how they might be blessed as they hear us praising God in the middle of the storm. If we knew that one person would come to know Christ as their Savior, as the result of some difficulty we endured, would it be worth it? It was worth it for Paul and Silas. That’s why they were willing to trust God and follow His lead. That’s why they continued to praise Him.

Conclusion –

Earlier in the service, we listened to a pretty powerful song, “I Lift My Hands,” about finding the strength to endure, and praise God, in difficult times. I had a chance to hear a little bit of the background of the song. in a video we watched in Bible Study a couple of years ago. A pastor named Louie Giglio shared how he was going through some difficult things in his life. One night, he woke up at 2 a.m. and it felt like his chest was going to explode, he couldn’t breathe, and didn’t know what was happening. He went to the hospital and they ran all kinds of tests, but they couldn’t find anything wrong. This continued to happen, over a period of time, and he saw all kinds of doctors, but they still couldn’t figure out the problem. He started to dread the night. It was like this dark cloud descended on him, and he couldn’t break free. Finally, one night he had enough, and he called out to God for help. A Bible verse came to his mind, about how God gives songs in the night. He started to pray “Lord, I’m not sure if I can sing, but if you give me a song, I will praise you.” Almost immediately, these lines came to his mind. In the midst of the dark cloud, the light began to break through. His problems didn’t go away, the next morning. He continued waking up in the middle the night, but now he had a song, and his outlook began to change. Instead of feeling overwhelmed he would sing songs of praise in the night, instead of pushing God away he chose to praise the Lord, and that helped bring him through the darkness. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXXK8W00GFOM>)

Maybe you’re going through a time of darkness in your life, trials that don’t seem to have any solution, troubles that seem overwhelming, you don’t feel like singing, and it’s even difficult to pray, don’t push God away, you need Him now more than ever, draw close to Him, and allow Him to put a song in your heart

(1) Avoid the temptation to push God away, in times of sorrow. He is not the cause of our suffering, to blame for our troubles. When we distance ourselves from God, and avoid the gathering of His people, we will only find ourselves sinking deeper and deeper into the pit of despair. In times of sorrow we need to draw close to the Lord, more than ever, not push Him away.

(2) Praise God even in times of adversity, because God is still just as faithful and just as good when the sun is shining as He is in the darkest storm. Allow Him to put a song in your heart. Allow the powerful words, of the great hymns of the faith, minister to you like a healing balm to your weary soul.

(3) Remember that your response to adversity will be a testimony to those around you. There are many people, all around us, who are also going through overwhelming struggles, and they need the hope of Jesus Christ. Our ability to praise God, in the midst of the storm, will point them towards the Savior.