

24. Praise in the midst of pain

January 19, 2014

Have you ever felt this way? You were doing everything you can to please the Lord, but only to find yourself in the midst of deeper trouble. You felt like you just have been kicked in the teeth.

Then, you were thinking, "How can anything go worse from here?" Wouldn't you know? Right in front of your eyes, another disaster was happening. You realize that the whole situation is completely out of your hand. So you surrender yourself to the Lord and cry out to Him in prayer from the bottom of your desperate heart.

Then, deep within your heart, you have the peace that can only be provided by the Lord. You have no idea how and when your situation is going to get better and you have no earthly means to solve the situation, but somehow you know that the Lord is going to work it out because He is faithful. Does this describe your current situation or previous one?

Apostle Paul and his missionary team arrived at Philippi, one of Roman colonies in eastern Macedonia region. The city was known as "Rome away from Rome" and it was filled with pagan idols and their proud worshippers. The Lord was about to turn this place right side up through Paul and his team. They started with their first European convert a woman named 'Lydia'.

This morning we have several topics to cover: demonic possession, combating against demonic force, overcoming difficulties, praise in the midst of pain, and simple faith in Jesus Christ. But we are going to concentrate in 'praise in the midst of pain.'

A. CONFRONTING A DEMON-POSSESSED SLAVE GIRL

Acts 16:16-19 Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. 17 This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." 18 And this she did for many days. But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And he came out that very hour. 19 But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities.

All fortune telling, psychics, horoscopes, and crystal ball reading are demonic as this slave girl was receiving her knowledge from demons. Though the person who does this type of thing does not know anything about the client, the demons can reveal the client's past to earn credibility and guess or predict human behavior.

Somehow many American Christians nowadays think that demon possession is a thing of the past. Not so. We will be surprised to know how many people in America are actually possessed by demons and completely controlled by them. They may not have any weird behavior or voice that you would expect, but demon possession is very real. Karen and I have encountered enough of them while we were doing a homeless ministry in downtown Tucson about twenty years ago.

Paul did not care for free advertising by this demon possessed girl. Besides, the statement she made was inaccurate. In Greek, 'the way' is "hodos." The proper translation is not 'the way', rather 'a way.' It is no wonder Paul was greatly annoyed.

B. PUBLIC RIOT AND JAIL TIME, AGAIN

Acts 16:20-24 And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, " These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; 21 and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe." 22 Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. 23 And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. 24 Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Driven by the loss of income from the no -longer-demon-possessed-slave-girl and racial prejudice and their occult desire, the masters of the slave girl had Paul and Silas arrested and beaten them.

In the Roman Empire there were two very different laws – one for citizens of the Roman Empire, and one for non-citizens. Roman citizens had specific, zealously guarded civil rights. Non-citizens had no civil rights, and were subject to the whims of both the multitude and the magistrates. The multitude and the magistrates felt free to abuse Paul and Silas because they assumed they were not Roman citizens.

Jewish legal tradition gave a maximum number of blows that could be delivered when beating a person, but the Romans had no such limit to prisoners. We simply know Paul and Silas were severely beaten.

2 Corinthians 11:23 Are they ministers of Christ?--I speak as a fool--I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.

Usually these kinds of stocks had more than two holes for legs, which could be forced apart in a such a way as to cause the utmost discomfort and cramping pain. The situation for Paul and Silas got worse and worse by the minute.

But even in their pain, God was not far from Paul and Silas. Though their legs felt nothing in the stocks, their hearts were in heaven.

C. PRAISE IN THE MIDST OF PAIN

Acts 16:25-34 But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. 27 And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. 28 But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here." 29 Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. 34 Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household.

Instead of complaining or calling out to God to destroy their enemies or being bitter toward the Lord for putting them in this situation though they were doing His work, these two men prayed and praised God. You may say, "I am not Paul, nor Silas who can sing praise songs to the Lord in the middle of misery. My pain is too real." For that, I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1) Do you think that these two godly men knew that God was going to set them free as soon as they finish the song?

No, the only thing they knew was that God is good and faithful no matter what. As a matter of fact, they could be executed next morning. As far as the magistrates who threw these two in jail were concerned, they were a couple of nobodies from Israel. Killing them had no consequences and it was as easy as flipping their thumbs down.

2) Do you think that the pain on their backs and legs were gone or make - believe?

They were in horrible pain. I know what it is like to be beaten with rod. It was very painful and hurt for days. How do I know? Because I was in the South Korean Army where beating subordinates with rod was norm and encouraged. I was at the receiving end enough.

Listen, when you are in pain, the middle of darkest hour is not the easiest time for a worship concert, but God gives us "songs in the night".

Psalm 42:8 The Lord will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, And in the night His song shall be with me -- A prayer to the God of my life.

I like what Charles Haddon Spurgeon, a great British preacher said, "Any fool can sing in the day. It is easy to sing when we can read the notes by daylight; but the skillful singer is he who can sing when there is not a ray of light to read by. Songs in the night come only from God; they are not in the power of men."

Prayer and praise to God are powerful weapons against despair and depression. Singing praise to the Lord is a tremendous way to alter our attitude and bring glory to God. While we sing to Him, we get to have the right perspective from Him; the songs remind us who God is; and we take our eyes off from the current situation to the Lord who can do all things.

I believe that Paul and Silas's praise songs were far better than Elvis Presley's Jailhouse Rock.

God responded to their praise songs with His toe tapping, knee slapping, and hand clapping which promptly caused a great earthquake that flung open all the doors, and loosened the inmates' chains. They could have fled to freedom, but instead they remained right where they were. For one thing, Paul immediately took command; and, no doubt, the fear of God was on these pagan jail inmates. They must have realized that there was something very special about those two Jewish preachers.

The circumstances said, "escape." But love said, "Stay for the sake of this one soul." Paul and Silas were not guided merely by circumstances, but by what love compelled. This hardened keeper of the jail was more affected by the love and grace of God demonstrated through these two godly men than by the earthquake.

The jailer was so impressed by Paul and Silas – by the love they showed to him, and from their ability to take joy even in misery – that he instantly wanted the kind of life that Paul and Silas have. This is how God wants our lives to be: Natural magnets

drawing people to the Lord. When the people around you see your joy of the Lord which is your strength in the midst of pain, they want what we have with God.

“What must I do to be saved?” is the cry of lost people worldwide, and we’d better be able to give them the right answer. Legalists in the church would reply, “Join our church; baptize in our denomination; speak in tongues; do this and do that.” But Paul had the right answer – a simple faith in Jesus Christ.

Have you prayed for deliverance from something that weakens you or hurts you, but deliverance hasn’t come? Remember, God’s grace is sufficient for you. He can transform your limitation into your “heavenly advantage” like He did with Paul and Silas.

2 Corinthians 12:9 And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Our weakness is a blessing when we lean on God’s strength.

One thing I must point out here before we go to the next passage. Paul mentioned that the jailer and his household would be saved by simply believing in the Lord Jesus. This is NOT so-called ‘household salvation’. It has no biblical basis. Nor should we read into this statement for the salvation of infants – with or without baptism. Infants must grow up enough to make individual decisions to accept Christ or reject Him, as well as having a baptism.

D. RELEASE AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Acts 16:35-40 And when it was day, the magistrates sent the officers, saying, “Let those men go.” 36 So the keeper of the prison reported these words to Paul, saying, “The magistrates have sent to let you go. Now therefore depart, and go in peace.” 37 But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out.” 38 And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans. 39 Then they came and pleaded with them and brought them out, and asked them to depart from the city. 40 So they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

Why did Paul and Silas not leave the town right away? Because if they left without a word, that would have left the new church under a cloud of suspicion by unbelieving people.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) The difficult situation you are in right now was permitted by the Lord to mature you, to strengthen you, to raise you above. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

2) Prayer and praise to God are powerful weapons against despair and depression.

3) Our weakness is a blessing when we lean on God’s strength.