

Two weeks ago we left Paul and Silas in the innermost prison, beaten dozens of times with rods by men trained to strike with maximum force. Their feet were then shackled to a post in the ground so that they were immobile in the darkness. Why were they there? They traded places with a little girl, having expelled the darkness which had bound and abused her, they were now abused and shackled in the darkness. Her freedom cost them theirs.

Thus they walked in the footsteps of their master, who exchanged the honor of His deity for the shame of our wickedness when we had exchanged his glory for images of things created. Thus, this suffering which they endure was not theirs to endure, yet they knew its value, its glory, and its temporality. They knew that even if they were executed, or locked up for years, that God would raise them up victorious with Christ Jesus – these temporal afflictions having worked for them an eternal weight of glory – these sufferings of this present time not worthy to be compared to the glory that is to be revealed to them.

This hope, then, enabled them to do two miraculous things. First, it enabled them to sing through the suffering. When they took their money away, they took their freedom away, they took their comfort away, and they threatened to take their lives away, their joy was still there. Their joy That is the miraculous joy of the gospel. Secondly, it enabled them to love their enemy. And God, through these two miracles, showed the extravagance of His great mercies by redeeming the most unlikely people: the very oppressors who violently worked to abuse His servants. God is the God who redeems enemies and makes them sons.

Let’s take a closer look:

1. God is Supreme in the Midst of Our Suffering

a. singing hymns

- i. Ephesians 5:19-20 and Colossians 3:16 both show how hymns and spiritual songs teach one another and are sung to the Lord
 1. This two-fold aspect of hymnody and songs of the Spirit are to be recognized and purposed in our singing
- ii. While they are sung “in gratitude to God” and “giving thanks to the Father through the Son”, they are also important instructive tools
 1. We gain a clearer picture of who God is, a reminder when our own souls cannot sing, calling us from the darkness of our guilt and shame into the light of God’s greater mercies
 2. When my soul is downcast, seeing only my own feet standing still, God uses my ears to get to my heart so that my feet move in gratitude to Him for His glory and my growing joy

b. praying to God

- i. Prayer recognizes, first and foremost, that God is capable of delivering us – that He is powerful, more powerful than any power which may have overpowered us
- ii. Prayer also recognizes that God is good – that is good enough to deliver us, even if the suffering persists, He will raise us up new – the resurrection hope is the basis of our prayers
- iii. So many psalms, sung as hymns, were prayers to the Lord (PSALM 143)
 1. They request His deliverance, His rescue, His salvation
 2. They thank Him for His great promises and His mercies
 3. They solidly rest upon His sovereign grace

c. Listening to them

- i. Those who have not received Christ as Lord see us as we suffer, and how we suffer matters
- ii. Our hope in the midst of suffering, our dependence upon our God stated, our faith in His great and precious promises reminded, and our honesty in the struggle is seen and heard
- iii. Why do you think none of the other prisoners left when the earthquake came?

2. God is Supreme Over All Our Oppressors

- a. You wonder if their singing and praying included quotations of Isaiah 63:19-64:2
- b. God undoes what His enemies do
 - i. what was locked was unlocked
 1. freedom by power
 2. What binds us has been broken (sin)
 3. What constrains us will be broken (resurrection)
 - a. Our graves will one day fly open, too, just like His
 - ii. what was solid was shaken
 1. power competition, and God wins
 2. What we know and feel to be solid, immovable, unchangeable, is not so for the Lord
 - a. There are so many things in our lives that feel like iron bonds upon the legs of our souls
 - i. Chronic pain, difficult children, a dead-end job, a long unemployment, infertility, singleness when you want to be wed...the list goes on
 - b. Yet, these are not the final word – there is an earthquake coming which will rattle these cages, loose these chains, and open the doors to flourishing life
 - i. This Curse is on its last legs
 - ii. God’s not done yet, and the final chapter has been announced, but not yet lived by we who dwell in the inner chapters
 3. Let us fix our eyes upon the promises of the Author, who has given us His notes on the final chapter...and it is VERY GOOD
 - a. So let us sing to the Lord for His divine rescue from His wrath
 - b. Let us cry out to the Lord for the completion of the story
 - c. Let us labor in these rocky fields in toils of winter’s mud with the certain expectation that God will take these little seeds and produce an explosion of life the Lion warmly breathes the Great Thawing.
- c. This earthquake, a mere shadow of what is to come, showed the jailer that the God to whom these men sang and prayed was more powerful than his own – and he feared for his life
 - i. First, he started content in his mistreatment of Paul and Silas
 1. The fact that he woke up means that he was content in their treatment
 2. He was losing no sleep over the injustice or treatment shown to them
 - ii. Then, he despaired for his life because of his powerlessness
 1. First, he gave up because of something which he had not investigated
 - a. He only saw the doors open, but didn’t check the inner prison
 - i. In the black of the prison, he couldn’t see in (hence, he asked for light later
 - b. In like manner, many people give up without investigating the hope of the gospel!
 - i. Maybe you are here today because you’re running out of hope
 - ii. Everything you see is failure, and the people whose judgment you respect, have seen your opened doors, your failure to do what you were supposed to do
 - iii. You, too, are on the brink of ending it all
 2. Many think that he was going to kill himself because he feared the authorities, and that not fulfilling your duties had no excuse (even an earthquake)
 - a. He could even be blamed for the earthquake (didn’t sacrifice correctly his god, etc.)
 - i. So, he was more likely to kill himself than to face the shame of not fulfilling his duties
 - ii. That, my friends, is real enslavement to shame
 - iii. Because when the prisoners whom your team has just beaten with rods and handed to you to keep in the darkest cell pray to their God and then the earth shakes and the doors fly open...you wonder what’s coming for you!

3. Mercy is God's Supreme Power to Break the Oppressor's Stony Heart
 - a. The man was expecting great judgment, as indicated by the earthquake and his response, but mercy and love were what was offered to him
 - i. Mercy
 1. Valued this man's life more than vengeance
 2. Paul did not owe it to the man to save his life
 3. "He called to him"
 - a. You can see the import of the word "calling"
 - i. Initiative and desire
 - ii. Same with God calling us
 - b. The calling is one of mercy, seeking the life of the one who harmed you and has been against you
 - ii. Love
 1. Valued this man's life more than his freedom
 - a. They knew that to escape meant that their freedom would come at the expense of the jailer's life
 - b. They repaid evil with good.
 2. He was in a position of power and used it to make another flourish – godly love
 - a. Paul didn't know how this man would respond
 - b. It could have meant more mistreatment for making him look bad
 - c. He loved him anyway, in spite of the costs
 - iii. In this manner the apostles exemplified the life of Christ Jesus, who answered our suicidal shame with a call that he was there for mercy
 - b. This mercy terrified him!
 - i. Terror came *after* Paul's mercy and honor of him!
 1. How often is this the case!
 2. Often God's judgment makes us run from Him, or mad at Him, or become stubborn
 3. However, when His mercy is seen fully in the face of our guilt and inability, it is even *more* devastating to our souls
 - a. 1 Tim 1:15-17 – mercy is shown to sinners, and the more we see ourselves as the foremost, the greater that it leads to praise (v17)
 - ii. Their life was so different, so altered in the manner in which they handled abuse and suffering, that it utterly devastated him
4. Mercy is Granted by the Supreme God through Faith in Jesus Christ Alone
 - a. Mercy moved him from suicidal shame to hopeful humility
 - i. It was power alone which led him to the door of suicide, but it was mercy which led him to humility and salvation
 - ii. When we see ourselves as infinitely weak and wrong, and God as supremely powerful but not good, then horror is the only outcome – you might as well kill yourself
 - iii. But when we see ourselves as infinitely weak and wrong, and God as supremely powerful AND merciful, then there is hope
 1. This dual characteristic of God is displayed most vividly at the cross of Christ
 2. His righteous wrath poured out upon Christ as if he were the doer of every evil ever desired, felt, and done
 3. His supplicant mercies poured out upon us as if we were the most righteous ones who have ever desired, felt, and done
 - b. Mercy humbles the sinner to respond powerlessly
 - i. He recognized that they had respectability, and possibly authority
 1. He called them "lords"
 2. This is usually reserved for those worthy of respect, most often because they have certain authority
 3. He, the Roman jailer, is submitting to the authority of these two Jewish men
 - ii. Then inquired how he could be saved

1. It is possible by this point that he knew the content of what the slave girl had claimed, “they proclaim to you the way of salvation”
 2. It is also possible that the hymns which they sung were loaded with salvation talk, which most hymns are
 3. Most likely, he is requesting how to be saved from the God who so powerfully delivered his prisoners and thus would condemn the ones who mistreated them
 - a. Yet, he immediately knew his great need, having been both demolished and beloved; stripped of his power, yet shown to be greatly valued by Paul and Silas
- iii. Their answer is not a doing, but an undoing – dependence
1. Faith is dependence, not merely assent to a truth
 - a. It is taking all the weight off of your own glory, reputation, and moral performance (fell on his knees) and placing all your weight upon Christ Jesus (Lord)
 2. To be baptized indicates one’s participation in that which one is baptized into
 - a. It is a changing of allegiances – indicated by the rite of baptism
 - b. It is a sign of one’s union with Jesus as Lord and Savior (Life, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension as Ruler Over All)
 3. The promise of dependence is for all people, his own household as well
 - a. Children, Parents, Servants, Workers, Cousins, etc.
 - b. The good news of salvation from the Most High God through faith in the Lord Jesus is a promise for everyone
 - c. Thus, the gospel was preached to the entire household
 - i. The fact the entire household was baptized *after hearing the gospel preached to them*, indicates that they also believed it
- iv. Saving faith identifies with God’s people
1. He took them into his home
 2. He washed their wounds out *himself*, like a servant or a friend
 3. He fully identified with them, too, in their suffering, i.e. baptism
- c. Do you want to be filled with the fullness of joy and hope so that you praise God?
- i. Then read the coexistent stories of God’s great holiness and judgment upon your sin AND God’s great love and mercy in Christ Jesus
 - ii. The CROSS – God’s wrath poured out upon Himself, His Son, and God’s mercy and inclusion given to you through it
 1. Mercy *through* judgment!
 2. Stare at this! Ponder this!
 - a. Don’t move quickly by the cross, simply because we hear the word so often
 - b. As the bee gathers more honey the longer she sits at the flower, so your joy will sweeten the longer you sit at the cross
5. Those Redeemed from God’s Just Power by God’s Mercy Celebrate Together
- a. Faith Celebrates God’s Deliverance With Exceeding Joy
 - i. Then they feasted together!
 1. Feasting together joyfully is what redeemed people do, “having depended upon God”
 2. Their joy was rooted in the promise of God through Christ Jesus, and they were elated to be rescued and included
 - a. This is why we will feast tonight!
 - b. Because we, too, have depended upon God and found in His promises our great and precious hope – a reason to celebrate: hope!
 - ii. Note, too, that “having depended upon God” is an exact parallel to “depend upon the Lord Jesus”

1. This indicates that the deity of Christ Jesus and His union with the Father was a very early Christian doctrine
- b. God redeems his enemies and the enemies of his church

There is a Jewish prayer from the Talmud (Babylonian), written around the 2nd century, which is part of the orthodox prayers of Jews even today. It reads, “Blessed are you O God, Lord of the Universe, for not making me a woman, a slave, or a Gentile.”

Yet, what Luke has shown us in this one city, Philippi, the first European city to hear the gospel of Jesus, is that through Christ Jesus, received by faith alone, God included a woman name Lydia, a slave who was possessed, and a Gentile who had violently oppressed. Not only this, but it clearly shows that there is not a “type” of Christian. Men, women, children. The Middle-Eastern Lydia, the slave girl from who knows where, and the European Roman jailer. There is no racial type. In fact, Christianity is the only world religion that has not had a single dominant geographical center. Islam has always been rooted in the Middle East. Hinduism is Indian. Confucianism is Chinese. Buddhism is centered in East Asia. But Christianity began in the Middle East, then its center moved to the Asia Minor Hellenistic world, then to the Northern European world, then its center moved to North America, and now there are more African Christians than North American Christians, and Latin American and Asian, Korean, Chinese. The center is moving again. Why? Because there is no “type” of Christian.

God includes all kinds of people into one family, His family, and they feast together as one because they share one Lord.

So do not lose hope in the midst of suffering, my friends. Your oppressors, be they antagonists of the gospel, or the antagonist of the Curse which threatens your health, or the sorrows of living in a world still enslaved to sin, will eventually be rocked by an earthquake so significant and so immense that all the bad things will come untrue. Jesus is risen from the dead, and He is returning to make all things right.

So, as you feel the weight of darkness around you, the shackles of your suffering rubbing the ankles of your soul raw, do not despair, but sing. Sing of the promises of God. Remind your soul, and the souls of those around you, of God’s great mercies and His sure and certain deliverance. And have mercy upon your enemies, for you, too were once an enemy of God; blind, arrogant, and oppressive. And He showed you great mercy. Expect Him to do it again with your oppressors. And when God redeems those who have harmed you, and they humbly fall at your feet in despair over their sin, bring them all the way in. For, as Paul told the Ephesians, “Be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, for there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope of your calling. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”