

The Power of Praise

Several things happened over the past couple of weeks that led my thoughts toward the power and importance of praise. I began the year talking about challenges and how we were going to face them and how we would overcome. Yesterday I attended the fifth funeral in six days. So many people have suffered loss at the beginning of this year. Then last Sunday night after our night of praise, Robert McDonough approached me and said, “Pastor, I really sensed in my spirit that we were engaged in spiritual warfare tonight as we praised and worshiped the Lord. Something powerful was happening as we offered our praise to the Lord.”

Challenges, grief and loss, breaking and defeating spiritual strongholds in our life, they all have something in common. Part of the way through these things, the way to overcome challenges and get through our grief and loss and battle through spiritual warfare involves praise and worship. Challenges are going to come to each of us, but the bible tells us **“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18** Praise will help us see our way through any and every challenge and obstacle. Grief and loss comes to all of us. Job experienced it and yet he taught us from the beginning to continue to give praise to the Lord. After the loss of his wealth and the death of his entire family, Job said, **“The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised. In all this Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.” Job 1:21-22.** Job knew that praise was a way through our grief and our loss. It lifts and changes our perspective, our view of our circumstances. We will face spiritual battles and spiritual warfare but the bible tells us God inhabits the praises of his people. He is enthroned upon our praise. David declared, **“Praise be to the Lord my Rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle.” Psalm 144:1** When the devil comes against us, praise becomes a spiritual weapon along with the word of God which enables us to conquer and defeat the enemy and to remain strong in the Lord. Praise and worship are powerful parts of our faith, our discipleship, our spiritual walk.

Another thing that happened was listening to Bryce as he led worship last Sunday. I heard him say, as he does quite often, “just lift your voices in praise to the Lord. Sing out a song to the Lord.” I listened and didn’t hear much of a response and then wondered, “Do people know what he’s asking? Have we instructed people on how to offer praise to the Lord? Have we given you tools you need to offer praise to the Lord? Have we equipped you so you will be comfortable in

praising the Lord? Have we told you what God expects and how to respond appropriately to the Lord? In case we haven't, we are going to try over the next couple of weeks.

Turn to Acts 16 and I want to share an event that occurs in the life of Paul that shows us the extraordinary power of praise in the midst of challenging circumstances. I want to use this chapter and this story as a launching pad for the teaching over the next couple of Sundays.

Paul and Barnabas had made plans to go on a second missionary journey, revisiting churches they had planted in their first journey. They were going to encourage the churches and deliver the decision of the first church council concerning requirements for Gentiles. The early church was made up of Jews who still lived by the cultural laws of Judaism, laws about how you prepared food, what you could and couldn't eat, keeping the Sabbath, circumcision for the males, etc. In order to become a follower of Christ and part of the church, some felt the Gentiles needed to live as Jews. As the leaders prayerfully met, the decision was made that Gentiles didn't have to become Jewish in order to be followers of Christ. They were instructed not to eat meat offered to idols and they were to refrain from sexual immorality. Paul and Barnabas were going to share that report with the churches but as they prepared to leave they had a disagreement about whether to take a relative of Barnabas, John Mark with them. On a prior trip John Mark had left them and come home. Paul didn't want him to go. Finally Barnabas takes John Mark and goes one direction and Paul takes Silas and goes another direction.

Paul and Silas meet Timothy along the way and he joins them and eventually Luke joins them as well. They were traveling through what is now southern Turkey. Acts 16:6-10 tells us the Lord prevented them from going into a certain area of the Roman province of Asia (Northern Turkey) and instead, Paul saw a vision of a man in Greece (Macedonia) saying, "Come and help us." They immediately made plans and sailed across the Aegean Sea to Greece, arriving finally in Philippi. This is where the fun begins.

Acts 16:13-15. On the Sabbath Paul and Silas (and notice the narrative now says "we" so apparently Luke has joined the group) went to the river where they expected to find a place of prayer. It probably means there was no synagogue in Philippi and that means a very small Jewish population since it required 10 Jewish men to form a synagogue. Perhaps they thought they would find some Jewish men and women, instead, they found a group of women. One in particular, a wealthy woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth which indicates she was well off, is referred to as a worshiper of God. This indicates she is a Gentile but has either converted to Judaism or has at least turned away from the gods and myths of Rome and is serving the true

and living God. She hears the gospel from Paul and the bible says, **“The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.” Acts 16:14** She and the members of her household were all baptized in the name of Jesus. She invited Paul and his traveling companions to stay at her house and they did! The first convert in Europe is a wealthy, Gentile woman.

Now we move from a wealthy woman to a slave girl who had a demonic spirit that enabled her to predict the future (Acts 16:16). The bible says she earned a great deal of money for her owners by telling fortunes. She followed Paul and his companions around for many days shouting **“These men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved.” Acts 16:17**

It’s interesting isn’t it, that the demons know Jesus is the Son of God and that he alone is the way to be saved. Demons know it, but why would they announce it? The truth was, her testimony would bring confusion. By this demon possessed girl saying this, it would link the gospel message to this occultic practice. It’s like fortune tellers praying over you and calling on the saints to give them insight, trying to mix the satanic with Christianity.

Paul has all he can take of this and finally turns around, troubled and grieved by the exploitation of this girl by both the men and by the devil. He commands the demonic spirit to come out of the girl and the bible says **“At that moment the spirit left her.”** Paul got rid of the demon but he also got rid of the source of income for the girl’s owners! Consequently, the men grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities.

Unwilling to admit the truth, that Paul and Silas had set their slave girl free from demonic possession, they stirred up the crowd with racial prejudice and accused them of breaking Roman law. **“These men are Jews and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.” Acts 16:20** The bible says **“The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.” Acts 16:22-24**

Several things you need to know about this. First of all, although Paul and Silas were Jews, they also happened to be Roman citizens. A Roman citizen could not be beaten or bound by any magistrate. He only had to tell them he was a Roman citizen and he would be immune to such punishment. It was a privilege of citizenship. Why Paul didn’t tell the magistrates, we don’t know. Possibly he was prevented or ignored by the crowd or the magistrates couldn’t hear

him. Obviously there was no investigation into the charges of the slave girl's owners. They rushed to judgment and had them beaten as there was no love lost by the Romans for the Jews anyway.

The bible says they were severely flogged. The Romans were merciless and again, they had no love for the Jews so they were especially brutal in their treatment of Paul and Silas. The guard placed them in the inner cells and fastened their feet in stocks. Bleeding and broken with their feet in the stocks. Not a good day.

Can you just imagine those two men, exhausted, bleeding, suffering. "Silas, you asleep?" "Are you kidding me?" "How are you doing?" "How am I doing? I'll tell you how I'm doing. I'm dying over here. That's how I'm doing. Man...this is awful. What are we gonna do now? Did you see that crowd out there? Those guys wanted to kill us. Paul, I want to know why God wouldn't let us go North in Turkey like we wanted. We would have been fine there, but no... God doesn't want us to go there you said. A vision you said...a man from Macedonia said come help us so we have to come here to Greece, to Philippi. No wonder Barnabas didn't want to come with you anymore. This is just sad."

"Hey Silas?" "What?" "I've got an idea." "Great. Another one? What now?" "Let's sing." "What?" "Let's sing. Let's start praising the Lord. We will just start our own prayer meeting and praise and worship service."

I have to admit, that probably wouldn't have been my first thought. Praising God. I would have been questioning, asking God why? I was trying to serve you and do the right thing and now I'm beaten and bleeding and miserable and in prison! I don't feel like praising God. I feel like screaming! But, instead of cursing or crying, instead of blaming God for the mess they were in, instead of giving in to anger or despair, at midnight, beaten and bruised, with their feet still in the stocks and locked up in a prison cell, they begin to pray and sing hymns and offer praise and thanks to God! The bible says, "and the other prisoners were listening to them." No wonder. They had never heard anything like this before. They had never seen this kind of response to a beating and imprisonment. The world doesn't know what to do when we respond with praise and worship and love and kindness. The other prisoners were listening and they knew there was something different about Paul and Silas. "What do you two have that we don't have because you've got something that makes you sing praises to God at midnight. You've got something that makes you praise and give thanks to God when he gives and you are still praising him when he takes away. You're praising him regardless of the circumstances!" Praising God

in the midst of trouble, still worshiping him when things aren't going as planned, that has an effect on those who are watching your life!

While Paul and Silas are praising the Lord and the prisoners are listening, **“Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open and everybody’s chains came loose.” Acts 16:26** I called this message the power of praise. Do I need to go any further to convince you there is power in praise? Paul and Silas are giving praise and thanks to God when an earthquake shakes the place, the prison doors fly open and the chains come loose off of the hands and ankles of the prisoners. I’m trying to tell you that when you praise the Lord, chains break loose, prison doors fly open. God inhabits the praises of his people and something powerful begins to happen when his people praise him. The atmosphere changes, from darkness and despair to hope and possibility. The limits come off just as surely as the chains come off. Paul and Silas knew they were to praise him because he is worthy of praise. Praise him because all things are possible. Praise him because he has come to set the prisoner free, to restore sight to the blind, to make the lame to walk, to bring life to the dying and hope to the hopeless. Praise him because he won't abandon you regardless of the circumstances or the charges against you. Praise him because you know you can trust him. Praise him because you know he will make a way when there seems to be no way. When God's people praise him in the midnight hour, when they praise him in the darkness, in the dungeon, in the difficulty, God's presence and power shows up to make a difference!

You need to just read the rest of this chapter because if it wasn't in the bible you couldn't hardly believe it! **“The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, ‘Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!’” Acts 16:27-28** A Roman prison guard was responsible for his prisoners with his own life. If those prisoners escaped under his watch, he would be executed in their place. He was expected to do the honorable thing and kill himself. But Paul stops him, assuring him all the prisoners were present and accounted for, which in itself seems a miracle. Something kept them there. I think those prisoners wanted to know the same thing the jailer wanted to know. They wanted to ask what the jailer asked.

“The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They replied,

‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.’ Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.” Acts 16:29-32

The jailer and his whole household, and perhaps other prisoners – were saved and baptized. The bible says, **“At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – he and his whole family.” Acts 16:33-34** St. John Chrysostom said, “He washed them and was washed; he washed them from their stripes, he himself was washed from his sins.”

From despised prisoners to honored house guests. From a hardened jailer to a joy filled member of the new church at Philippi. What a night! His whole family saved. Perhaps other prisoners saved. Think about the new church at Philippi. A Gentile business woman, a former demon-possessed slave girl, now a jailer and his family and a group of ex-convicts. That’s the church! All of this must have made the suffering of Paul and Silas worth it. And this wouldn’t have happened if they hadn’t been praising the Lord in their prison cell at midnight!

There is more to the story and you can read that on your own as the magistrates sent officers to order the release of Paul and Silas and then find out they have beaten Roman citizens! But what I want you to see is the power of praise to change the circumstances, to change the atmosphere in that prison. From prison cell to praise gathering. From a place of despondency and despair to a place where the liberating power and presence of God is manifested.

We are either going to drown in despair and darkness or we are going to pray and intercede and lift up praise to the Lord and ourselves be lifted up and encouraged. We are going to have to learn how to praise the Lord. We are going to have to release praise to the Lord and worship him or we won’t be able to overcome the challenges we will face. I don’t care what happens, he is worthy of our praise and praise will alter the atmosphere. Praise will break the chains. Praise will open the doors. Is it midnight for you? Praise him! Are you bound? Praise him. Can’t see which way to go? Praise Him. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!