

Praise in a Time of Concern
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Sunday, March 29, 2020

It is amazing to think of all the things that affect our moods. Sometimes we can go from being in a good mood to being in a foul one pretty quickly. E.g., I recall the other day I was in a good mood, and then I started getting a bit irritable and impatient. I recall thinking, why do I feel this way? Why has my attitude changed? Then I sat down and had a good lunch, and I, surprisingly, felt in a much better mood and I was much easier to get along with. All I needed was food! Other things can also affect our moods and our attitudes. E.g., we can look at the stock market— which I don’t advise you to do now! I have decided not to look at how low my pension funds at this time! E.g., we can look at how certain people feel about us. We can do all sorts of things, and allow ourselves to be caught up in the circumstances of life and allow them to rule over us. Or we can do something different. We can allow God to intervene. That is what Paul and Silas did in our passage today.

READ Acts 16:16-34 (p. 136)

CONTEXT: Paul is on his second missionary journey, and takes Silas along with him. They are in Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey, traveling in the late 40's AD.

“Paul came to Philippi because of a vision from God (cf. Vv 9-10).” Have you ever felt led by God somewhere? It is important, if we do feel led, that we be sure it is consistent with God's Word in the Bible. And it is important that we know that His leading does not necessarily mean everything goes easily for us in life. E.g., I recall when I was in Scotland and had just arrived and was getting settled in to the program and all the new things in the culture and I was moaning to the Lord— Lord, I miss my family, I miss NFL football, all the things of home life to which I was used. And then I sensed the Lord telling me, “That is why I brought you here— to be away from all those distractions and to focus on your studies!” E.g., I have heard one Christian talk about marriage like that— God calls two believers in a marriage together, they have a lot of problems and argue and don't like certain things about the other person, and as they stay in the marriage and compromise and have the give and take and serve one another out of love for the Lord and learning to rely on the Lord and His love to sustain them, they find over time they are becoming more gracious, more forgiving, more patient, better teachers, better conflict managers— i.e., they are becoming more holy, like Jesus. The Lord calls Paul and Silas and Timothy and Luke to go to Macedonia, where the city of Philippi is, and we will see the going was not always easy— but it was fruitful! They initially meet Lydia by the river as they had a worship service, and she listens to Paul and gets baptized and invites Paul and his companions to come live at her house.

READ vv 16-22. “When Paul cast out the demon from the slave girl who made money for her masters as a fortune-teller, the magistrates had Paul and Silas

beaten with rods for what seems to be reasons of peace - disturbance as well as anti - Semitism (cf. 18:2).” The slave girl is said to have literally “a Python spirit”, what the NRSV translates as “a spirit of divination”. Commentators speak of a myth that a python snake guarded the temple of Delphi where oracles of the gods came, and Apollo killed the python and those who speak at the temple are filled with the spirit of Apollo and are called “pythonesses” and speak as for Apollo, acting as ventriloquists. This idea seems to be behind the description of this servant girl— she is filled with a pagan spirit, a demon as Paul called it in 1 Corinthians 10:20 that pagans sacrifice at their temples not to gods but to demons. This girl followed Paul and his companions around for several days and shouts out that “These men are slaves of the Most High God”— perhaps a reference to Zeus— “who proclaims to you the way of salvation”. A demon does this in Luke 4:34 in proclaiming to Jesus “I know who you are, the Holy One of God”. NT scholar I. Howard Marshall (*Acts*, p. 269) suggests this could be a way the demon was trying to show superiority over Jesus, and this could well have been the case with this slave girl showing superiority over Paul. When Paul finally gets exhausted of her following them around and casts out the demon in the name of Jesus, all trouble breaks loose. Her owners are furious that now the girl, in her right mind, can no longer make money for them. So they drag Paul and Silas before the magistrates and the crowd joins in in condemning them. The charges are basically disturbing the peace and being Jews. The disturbing the peace charge probably came with the fact that Paul was evangelizing Roman gentiles to abandon their gods and follow the Jewish Messiah— this was not illegal, but certainly frowned upon by the Romans. NT scholar Joseph Fitzmyer quotes from Cicero (first century BC) who wrote before this time, “No one shall have god for himself, either new or foreign gods, unless they are officially recognized” (*Acts*, p. 587). Marshall explains, “The Romans were officially not supposed to practice

foreign cults, although in practice they might do this so long as these did not offend Roman customs. The principle was clearly a flexible one which could be invoked as necessary” (*Acts*, p. 270). It was clearly being invoked here in Philippi, which was a Roman colony which was very high on patriotism. Paul and his companions are not against Roman patriotism, but are in favor of replacing the Roman worship of pagan gods with the worship of the one true God, Jesus. E.g., in the fascinating book *Bruchko*, Bruce Olsen tells of his bringing the gospel to a South American tribe and how they left their understanding of God for the one true God— but unlike Paul, there was no crowds against him! The anti-Semitism in the Roman world is seen here and in Acts 18:2 where the emperor Claudius expelled Jews out of Rome for a time. E.g., unfortunately anti-Semitism is still alive today, despite the horrors of the holocaust. This is the case in western Europe and in the United States. This anti-Semitism feeling was at play in Acts 16, and worked against Paul and Silas— and probably why Timothy (half-Jewish, with a Jewish mother) and Luke (a gentile) were not arrested.

READ vv 23-34. “When the viciously beaten Paul and Silas are imprisoned with their feet secured in stocks, their reaction to God was not one of complaint but praise! How so? Cf. Acts 5:40-42; Romans 5:3; 8:15-17; James 1:2.” This is difficult for us— for me — to understand. How can they be joyful despite difficult times, suffering for their faith? Yet this was typical of the New Testament Church— and it is typical of many Christians suffering today. E.g., Ramzi is a Christian convert from being a Muslim leader in a Middle Eastern country. He experienced much rejection and threats when he came to Christ— not only was his house showered with bullets and set afire, but his own son was run hit by someone on a motorcycle and left for dead— the son was rushed to the hospital where he had a coma for three days and an arm broken in three places, and he has lost hearing in his left ear. By God’s grace, Ramzi was able to be

located in another town. But this is what he says: “The grace of God is so great in our lives. . . It is without boundaries. Everything that happened truly was hard, but we are not upset. We are happy because God has chosen us, so we have given our lives completely to Him. Before we were living in a life of darkness and a life of ignorance. After we came to faith in Christ, we experienced joy like we have never experienced before. We see something new every day” (from *The Voice of the Martyrs* magazine, December 2019, p. 11). As a result the jailer, after the earthquake and seeing Paul and Silas not flee, which would have cost the jailer his life, became a Christian, along with his entire household!

“How do Paul and Silas set an example for us as we live in an age of coronavirus and its restrictions on our lifestyle?” We are not suffering for our faith. Indeed, many outside the U.S. would say we aren’t suffering at all really—especially with the two trillion aide package passed this week. May we this week, whenever we are tempted to complain about the restrictions placed upon us or the uncertainties we face in the future, may we have a song of praise on our lips and in our hearts. We don’t know the future. But we know the One who has the future in His hands, and we who follow Jesus trust ourselves in His hands for His will. So let’s try to sing the song “Majesty, Worship His Majesty” each day this week to the Lord— or a similar song of praise to Him. The lyrics can be found through Google.