

When the Road Is Hard

[Acts 9:16-31](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes
Sunday, March 26, 2000

I am continuing in a series of Lenten sermons on the missionary journeys of Paul, as a means of exploring our own journey behind the Lord Jesus Christ. Today we discover that Christ leads us into places so dark that our only light is a song.

**** When we last left our missionaries, Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy, they had just received a vision to go and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in Macedonia, which is modern Greece. The first city they stopped at was Philippi, and apparently the first convert they made was a woman named Lydia. Her home was in the province of Asia Minor, but she had moved to Philippi to run the local franchise that sold expensive purple cloths. So she had something like an ancient Armani store. She was probably wealthy. After she was converted, she insisted that the missionaries stay with her. So far so good, for our missionaries. They had a new convert with a big house, which was perfect for the church. This Greek thing seemed to be working out just fine.

As the missionaries went back and forth to their place of prayer, a slave girl with an evil spirit began running behind them saying, "These men are slaves of the most high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." This was actually quite true. The demonic always recognizes the danger of salvation. As this girl continued day after day she began to annoy Paul. So, as the text tells us, "very much annoyed," Paul turned to her and ordered the demon to come out of her in the name of Jesus Christ.

Notice that Paul was not filled with compassion for this girl, which I find reassuring. Essentially, he cast out the demon because he was irritated by her, which is a good enough reason to get rid of evil. After a while you just get tired of putting up with it. It is also significant that Paul didn't gather the community together to pray about this. Nor does he set up a task force to study the demon problem. He simply calls on the name of Jesus to heal this tormented soul.

This slave used to make her owners a lot of money telling fortunes. So when Paul cast out the demon, he also cast out their means of exploiting the girl. This infuriated the owners who dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates and said, "These men are disturbing our city, they are Jews..." They said nothing about the girl being healed but they do mention that Paul and Silas are Jews. (It is significant that they didn't bring Luke or Timothy who were Gentiles.) Then the whole crowd got whipped up into a racist agitation and started attacking Paul and Silas. So to keep the peace, the magistrates had the missionaries beaten with rods and thrown in prison.

This is completely unjust. Paul and Silas had done nothing wrong. Simply by freeing a young girl of a demon, the missionaries had lost their freedom. The men who were exploiting the girl appealed to the antisemitism of the crowd and the fear of the magistrates to get a little payback, and it looks like they got away with it. Also, Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, which made this treatment illegal. So nothing about this is right or just.

If I were Silas, sitting in a dark jail next to Paul with my feet in stocks, dabbing the blood that was running off my shoulders, I would have been tempted to ask Paul, "Are you really sure about this vision you had for us to come to Macedonia. Paul, are you sure this was Jesus? Maybe it was just a dream, you know. Maybe a bad dream. If God wanted us here, why would he let this happen to us?"

As a pastor, I hear that question quite a lot. Our city is filled with people who come here to do great things: serve the public, work for a more just society, care for the poor. People who care about those things tend to have a great sense of mission in life that they believe was given to them by God. But after arriving in this town, they meet others who disagree with their sense of mission, and who will use every political maneuver possible to keep them from fulfilling their mission. So the going gets hard. Even unjust.

It is not unlike the resistance parents meet from the children they are trying to guide, or the resistance a teacher meets in the classroom, a lawyer in court, or doctors and nurses in the course of trying to be healers. If your mission was given to you by God, it will inevitably be met with resistance at some point. When that happens, when the going gets real hard, our great temptation is to ask ourselves if maybe we misunderstood God. Maybe he didn't say Macedonia. Maybe he said go to Bermuda. Maybe I was never supposed to come here. Maybe I was never supposed to be married or have children. These are the questions you ask when you have been beaten up trying to fulfill a mission. You even start to wonder if this whole business of a call from God is a lot of malarkey.

The fascinating thing is that we have no record in Scripture of either Silas or Paul asking these questions or doubting their call from God. Instead, we are told that they spent their evening in jail praying and singing hymns. We are even told that the other prisoners were listening to them. (As if they had a choice.) So a little revival broke out in the dark corners of the jail in Philippi.

Historians would love to know exactly what those hymns were that Paul and Silas sang. But we don't know for sure. The chances are good, since they were Jewish, that they sang Psalms. Since they had been put in jail, in part, because they were Jews, did they sing from Psalm 129? Often they have attacked me from my youth -let Israel now say- often they have attacked me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me. The Lord is righteous; He has cut the cords of the wicked.

When you are in a dark place on the journey, hurt, because of your race, gender, political party, or your religious convictions, you face a great choice that will determine the rest of the journey. If you choose to only nurse your hurts, you are essentially choosing to be always a victim. It does not matter where else you go or who else you meet, you will continue to position yourself as a victim. These men are refusing to be victims! They choose instead to let their songs of praise rise as protest against evil.

In his autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela claimed that in his twenty-seven long years in a South African prison the singing of the prisoners was essential to his ability to survive. That is because as they sang, the prisoners protested that

their souls were still free. It takes more than stone and iron to imprison a human soul.

When we gather in this sanctuary after a week of living in a society filled with conflict, and pull out our hymnbooks to sing hymns like we did today, "Rejoice Ye Pure in Heart," we are not pretending the world isn't filled with evil. We are making a holy protest against it all by singing praise to our God who reigns. And we are claiming that our souls are still free.

After surviving a concentration camp, Victor Frankel wrote that, "The last of all human freedoms after surviving a concentration camp, is to determine your response to any circumstance." Here in this holy sanctuary we use our last freedom to sing praise to God. It is our greatest protest against the evil and our way of casting out the demonic temptation to fear. So we can join Paul in claiming we are "Afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed." Why are we not destroyed? Because we sing.

Maybe Paul and Silas sang from Psalm 130. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits and in his word I hope. My soul waits for the Lord, more than the watchman for the morning, more than the watchman for the morning. If Psalm 129 is a praise of protest, Psalm 130 is a praise of hope. And hope is always found in the hard places of life, the places of suffering. The biblical view of suffering is not that it is a judgment. Nor is it that which can be avoided if you are only careful. According to the Bible suffering is an invitation into the depths where we are at the heart of the real issues of life. Our great hymns of the faith teach us that no matter how deep it gets, God is deeper still. So suffering, heartache, or conflict are never the bottom line. Beneath it all is still our God. So in the bottom places of life we find hope. This is why I like the line of the Creed that reminds us Christ descended into hell before ascending into heaven. That reminds us that it doesn't matter how low we sink, even to hell itself, we will find a savior. Only in him can we then ascend to heaven. So he alone is our hope.

Why do Paul and Silas sing? Because they know they are not just Jews, or even just citizens of Rome. From the depths of their souls they know they are citizens of the coming Kingdom of God. And the gates of hell cannot prevail against that kingdom.

While they sing with such faith, the earth begins to heave. Their shackles and chains unfasten. The doors to their jail break open. And they are made free! Whenever the people of faith insist upon hope, the earth shakes, injustice falls, and a little more room for heaven is made on earth. When the jailor sees this, assuming that his prisoners have escaped, he prepares to kill himself, knowing his life will be required. Seeing what the jailor is about to do, Paul stopped him and said "We are all still here." Staring at these men who had clearly been saved by God, what else could the jailor ask but, "What must I do to be saved?" What must I do to be saved from my despair and from this lousy job? What must I do to be saved from my sins and from my discovery that I have wasted most of life on the wrong side? They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household." That night the jailor took the missionaries home to wash their wounds. And the missionaries washed away his despair in Holy Baptism.

So let us look at who we now have as charter members of the church in Philippi. A wealthy business woman from Asia. A Greek slave girl, who used to tell fortunes. And a Roman prison guard. What could possibly bind together such a diverse little group? They had all been saved by our world conquering hope.

If you are tired of being a victim and tired of being stuck in the dark places, there is still room in this community of hope for you. Apparently, it doesn't matter how wealthy or poor you are, or what your race or nationality is. It doesn't matter if you have been enslaved by addictions or sin. It doesn't even matter if you have spent most of life on the wrong side. All that matters is that you ask the question, "What must I do to be saved?" You start asking that question and before you know it, a holy song will emerge from the depths of your soul. Amen.