

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 22

Making a Difference

Read: Acts 16:22-34

There aren't too many people who like the thought of being different. The idea of standing out from the crowd fills many with fear. We want to blend. The reward is acceptance and to a certain degree anonymity. We want to be accepted as one of the group, and we certainly don't want to stand out like an ink stain on a white shirt. The only problem with this kind of thinking is that it keeps you from having any impact on anything or anyone. George Bernard Shaw said, *"The world is ruled by deeds, not good intentions, and one efficient sinner is worth ten futile saints and martyrs."* If we are to live lives that make a difference in the world, we must live lives that are different from the world. We must rise above the average and the status quo like an eagle rises on the wind.

Now, I know some of you may be thinking, *"That's easy to say, but it's difficult to soar with the eagles when you're surrounded by turkeys."* Well, it is true that we do have to live in this world. We do have to endure the same problems and difficulties which are common to everyone. But while we may walk with the turkeys at times, we have been given an eagle's heart and soul which enables us to spread our wings and rise on the mighty currents of the Spirit. That's the picture the prophet Isaiah had.

Isaiah 40:31 *"... those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles."*

By God's grace, God's empowering presence, we can be different and we can make a difference in the lives of others. How we act and react in this pressure-cooker world should be important to us because of how it affects us, and because of how it impacts others. The Bible teaches that we are ambassadors for Christ. We are here, in Christ's place, appealing to others to be reconciled to God. If what they see in our lives is a Christian faith which makes a difference, then they will be interested. But if what they see is the same old thing they see in themselves, they will dismiss us without a thought. In our text today, we journey with two men who made a difference. They would later be called those *"who had turned the world upside down."* They made a difference because they were different. In the next few moments, we will see how we can become more like them - how we can become people who actually make a difference.

What happens when a terrible situation becomes the reality of your life? All you're doing is trying to live your life, do your best, do what's right. You're not doing anything wrong. And then, unexpectedly, without warning, you are bowled over by a set of circumstances over which you have no control. Well, that's precisely what happened to Paul and Silas. They had been preaching the Gospel wherever they were, and now they came to Philippi. But not everyone liked what they were doing or saying.

Acts 16:22-24 *"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."*

Notice how this situation unfolds. Because of their witness for Christ, not because they had done anything wrong, they were both arrested. And the first thing that happens to them is that they are sentenced and beaten. The magistrate conducted a kangaroo court, in which he was judge and jury. Their robes were torn from their backs, and they were beaten with rods. The Scripture says that they inflicted many blows upon them. This must have been an excruciating ordeal. Then they found themselves thrown into prison.

Not only were they sentenced and beaten, but they were also secluded and bound. It was not enough to beat them without a fair trial. Nor was it enough to throw them in jail without determining their guilt. They were thrust into what the Scripture calls the inner prison. This was the most secure dungeon in the prison complex. It was a horrible place. It was a cell, dug deep into the earth, located in the centre of the prison. There were no windows, therefore, no light. The floor was dirt. It was damp. It stank with the odour of human waste. This is a bleak picture indeed. But the picture isn't complete.

Not only were they thrown into this horrible place, but the jailer fastened their feet in the stocks. Even within this inner prison, they were bound with chains. It would be difficult to describe a much more depressing situation than that which befell Paul and Silas. I am sure they could have easily asked the obvious question, "Why?"

There is a truth here which we must understand. The truth is that bad things do happen to good people. That is an important truth to understand. If we do not understand that truth, we will be forever asking, "Why?" The answer is that all of us, saved and unsaved, good and bad, have to deal with bad situations. The Bible teaches that the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. We all live in a fallen world, and because of the sinful condition of all of humanity, bad things happen, even to good people, even to the best of us. It's how we react to the bad things that count.

The Devil comes along, much like Job's wife did, and says, "Curse God and die." In other words, blame it on God and give up. That's what the Devil wants us to do. He wants us to quit. He would like for us to become convinced that God is not really on our side after all, that it's no use to continue to trust in Him. If we would become discouraged, begin feeling sorry for ourselves, blame God for all our troubles, and throw in the towel, that would play right into Satan's hands. But rather than doing that, we need to do what Paul and Silas did.

Acts 16:25 *"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them."*

Rather than bring out the worst in them, this dreadful turn of events brought out the best. Notice, first of all, that they were focused in prayer. In the midst of this dark situation, they had not forsaken God. They knew that what they needed most, only God had. What we see here are men praying in a crisis, but not simply because of the crisis. I am convinced that they were praying because prayer had become the normal thing to do for both of these disciples. Indeed, prayer ought to be the normal thing for a Christian to do in every situation of life, both the good and the bad. Prayer is the great privilege believers have of talking over every detail of life with God.

Most people would pray if they were in a desperate a situation like Paul and Silas, but it would only be a prayer of desperation. God still answers those prayers – but He really desires to have a daily, moment by moment relationship with us. Not just hearing from us when we are in a bind. When He sacrificed His only Son to bring His lost children home, He didn't plan to have them run off again and only call home when they ran into strife. So, we need to learn how to pray when times are good too.

We need to develop a strong daily prayer life, where we learn how to communicate with God and learn to hear His voice. If we do, then when the hard times come, we will be able to effectively touch heaven and receive grace to help in time of need.

Now notice the nature of their prayer. Their prayer was not merely a lament over the terrible situation in which they found themselves. Their prayer was a prayer of worship and a prayer of praise. We see here that they were not only focused in prayer, but their hearts were full of worship. Notice the text says that around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. Far from being depressed about this situation, they were full of thanksgiving. They knew God had not forsaken them; that somehow God was going to do a mighty work in the midst of this terrible situation. They saw in this obstacle an opportunity. They knew the truth that God manifests His presence in the praises of His people so they focussed on the positive, not the negative. They had become faith-driven optimists. Being an optimist is a matter of perspective. It depends on how you look at things whether you are an optimist or a pessimist.

Two shoe salesmen were sent to Africa and South America. The pessimist in Africa wrote back, *"I'm coming back home. Nobody wears shoes here."* The optimist in South America wrote back, *"Great news! Nobody wears shoes here - send me some help!"* It's always a matter of perspective.

The world is crowded with people who look at the negative – always see the dark side – never believe that there is good in the midst of every bad situation. I'd rather be an optimist. In fact, there is very little room for people who claim to be Christian to be anything but an optimist! I know there are thousands of people in churches who are quick to point out faults and barriers and obstacles and problems and who are the first to complain when things don't go their way – it's a sad truth that they exist, but there really is no room for such a person in the church when we read the New Testament. It makes absolutely no sense that a person who is supposedly indwelt by the Spirit of God Himself could view life through such dark, depressing glasses.

The bottom line this this: a pessimist is not only a person who is living in denial – denial of the power of God to meet their every need, they are also living in sin: the sin of unbelief. When we consistently find faults and deficiencies and problems in people, in life and even in ourselves; when we focus on the things we don't have or can't do and ignore the things we do have and can do, then we are effectively slapping God in the face and saying: *"You are not powerful enough to do anything about my sad and sorry lot in life."*

This is the sin of unbelief in action; it's failing to trust God in the most basic areas of life; it's evil; it's destructive to the very fibre of the church; it quenches the Spirit of God in you and those around you; it's a demonic, critical spirit that does not belong in a child of God and when you discern that spirit in yourself or in those around you – it needs to be confronted. Call it what it is – sin! It must be cut out of you and those around you and the church – like a malignant tumour.

A critical, judgemental, pessimistic spirit is like a rapidly multiplying cancer in the Body of Christ. We tolerate it at our own peril. Personally, I believe have been allowed to whinge and criticise and find fault and complain far too long. We have become so used a fault-finding negative outlook in us and others that we are no longer offended by it - it no longer seems to worry us like it should.

Paul and Silas were optimists and they had good reason to be. They were optimists because they knew the God Whom they served. They knew what He had done in their lives and they had absolutely no right to complain – not even when they were beaten and bound and thrown into a stinking hole.

These two knew that they deserved death – they deserved the full judgement of God and it is only by His grace and his love and His mercy that they live and breathe. So rather than compare their current situation with what they might enjoy outside the prison – they compared it to death – which is where they were headed before the grace of God transformed them and brought them into the Kingdom of God. They had experienced the wonder-working power of God's love and they lived with the reality of that every day.

Friends, we too have experienced that same wonderful God. We serve a God who loved us before we ever knew what love was; who saved us when we only deserved His wrath; and who has met us time and time and time again with His love and mercy, patience and forgiveness – grace upon grace upon grace upon grace! God has done many miracles in our lives. He will stand with us in the hard times.

Because Paul and Silas understood this about God, they were full of praise when many of us would be suicidal, angry, fearful and totally devoid of faith and courage. Picture two beaten, bleeding, cold men in the darkest dungeon, at midnight, lifting up their voices in praise to God. They were singing when they should have been crying. They were rejoicing when they should have been lamenting. They were hopeful when they should have been distraught. They were doing the exact opposite of what the world would do. And notice that it says that the other prisoners were listening. When you're facing a difficult situation and you have a song in your heart and praise on your lips, those around you will surely notice.

Many Christians live as though God were not real. With their lips they may tell you they believe in God, but by their lives they refute their own confession. It is ironic that the church needs to be exhorted to live as though God were real, but that is precisely the exhortation we need. We must live as though God were real because He IS real. And the world needs to hear that truth from us and see that truth in us: God is real! How big is your God? Your lips may confess that He is the Almighty, all-powerful Creator and Sustainer of the Universe and nothing can stand against my God. But what your lips many confess; what your voice may sing on Sunday - could easily be denied on Monday when your life denies the power of God. Well, in the midst of this dreadful situation, God began to move. Notice what happened.

Acts 16:26 *"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."*

The whole jail was shaken! God sent a great earthquake. The foundations of the prison were shaken. Get this picture ... the shaking was so great that the doors of the prison cells were opened. But we see something interesting here: the chains which bound these prisoners also fell from their feet and hands. This was no normal earthquake. This was the supernatural work of God. God was responding to the worship and prayers of His servants and He shook this prison and set the captives free!

Revivalist, Vance Havner once said, *"When we go through God's testing properly, all we lose are the shackles that tied us up earlier."* Paul and Silas had passed the test. God had heard their prayer. He had received their praise, and now He acted on their behalf. But notice something else. Not only do we have a shaken jail, we have a shaken jailer. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors 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!"* The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. (16:27-29) Not only was the jail shaken, so was the jailer. He had been asleep until this earthquake hit. When he awoke, he saw the doors to each cell were wide open. He assumed all of the prisoners had escaped.

Knowing that the punishment for a Roman guard with escaped prisoners was death, he drew his sword to kill himself. How surprised he must have been when he heard Paul's voice! He was shaken at first physically by the earthquake; he was shaken even more on an emotional level when he saw the prison doors open - shaken to the point of committing suicide, in fact. And now, when he heard they were all still there, he was shaken to the very core of his being. It says that he rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. Here we see a once proud Roman guard, humbled before his captives. This tough, thoroughly disciplined soldier knew something supernatural was happening.

The amazing thing about this incident is that even though the doors were wide open, and the chains had fallen from them, no one had left. We've already seen how Paul and Silas were praising God in the midst of their imprisonment. Could it be that they had such peace that they felt no compulsion to leave, even when the prison doors were opened? Undoubtedly so.

They were truly men who trusted in God. But what about all of these others? What was it that caused the other prisoners to stay as well? Well, I believe they stayed because Paul and Silas stayed. They had seen something in these two men which they wanted. Their lives had been impacted and changed by the living testimony of Paul and Silas. We see here, firsthand, the transforming power of God in the heart of a sinner. The first thing this Philippian jailer would receive was a new heart.

Acts 16:30-33a *"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. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds."*

Because of what he had seen in Paul and Silas, this jailer asked the question of the ages. He said, "What must I do to be saved?" Their reply was, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household." That very night, this jailer put his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and received a new heart. He was a changed man. He took Paul and Silas and washed their wounds. He brought them to his house and they shared the Lord Jesus with his whole family. Something indeed had happened to this man. He had been born again. But notice that he not only received a new heart, he received a new home.

Acts 16:33b-34 *"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."*

Not only he was born again, but his whole family was. He received a new heart and a new home, all because he put his faith in Jesus Christ. Now he, too, could rejoice in the power of God to save. They had trusted, not in a God who had to deliver them from the hard times, but in a God who would be with them in the hard times. And as a result of that kind of faith, lives had been changed.

Do you see what has happened here? Because of how these two Christians responded to a terrible situation, others were impacted for Christ. People were changed because they saw a difference in the lives of Paul and Silas. And they will be changed today, when they see a difference in our lives. Never apologise for being different. It is in being different that you truly make a difference! We have not been born to blend. We have not been called to be like other people. We have been called to be like Christ. We must allow Christ to live His life in us and through us. It will be a life full of power, full of praise, full of Jesus. It will be different, manifestly different, from the other lives lived out around us.