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Acts 16:19-29 “Victory Over Adverse Circumstances”

Intro. In my last message I shared with most of you this same text of Scripture. Here we see a great example of some believers experiencing “victory in Jesus.” They experienced victory over Satan in vv.16-18. They experienced victory over difficult circumstances. And then we learned how they experienced victory over their accusers and other sinners.

This Sunday I want to consider more in depth concerning the victory over circumstances that Paul and Silas had, and how we also can have victory over our difficult circumstances. But first I need to remind you of the background of what happened that led up to the difficult circumstances Paul and Silas faced. In the name of Jesus Paul had cast out a demon from a slave girl, who had an unusual ability to predict the future. Then we read in v.19, “But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities.” Since she had such ability, you can imagine how profitable this slave girl was. Even today many people spend a great deal of money in fortune tellers, horoscopes, etc.

Have you heard the story of the fortune teller who told her client that her fee would be \$25.00 for 2 questions? And the client said, “You mean I only get 2 questions for \$25.00?” She said, “That’s right! What’s your 2nd question?” There are indeed many fakes out there who are just out to get your money. But, this girl had a real demonic ability to predict the future. And when Paul cast out the demon, she lost that supernatural ability and you can imagine how it hurt her income for her masters. Of course, her masters became enraged at Paul and Silas because of their loss of income. That is not surprising. People are very touchy about money. So, they wanted to get back at these apostles and they dragged them through the streets, falsely accused them, resulting in the apostles being beaten and thrown into prison. They were in pain. They were in prison and did not know how long they would be there. They were in difficult circumstances indeed.

Now what would you do if you found yourself in similar circumstances? I know what most of us would do. We would first ask, “Why me, Lord? I have been doing your work and trying to live right. Why have you let this happen to me?” We might complain a little bit and even charge God with being unfair. After all, Luke and Timothy were not beaten and cast into prison. We might even get angry at God. But as we pointed out last week, Paul and Silas did not complain and become bitter and angry. They didn’t question the goodness of God. Instead, they were able to praise the Lord and they gained complete victory over their circumstances. And so I want us to look more in depth at this Scripture and learn how to have victory over bad circumstances in our own lives. So first of all, notice with me:

I. THE CERTAINTY OF BAD CIRCUMSTANCES

We must understand and accept the fact that we *will* face difficult circumstances in life. We cannot avoid them completely since we live in a fallen, sinful world. You cannot expect that all of your days will be bright and sunny. You will face clouds and storms, at least from time to time.

Now this truth was illustrated:

A. In Paul's Life - As I have indicated, Paul and Silas faced a trying time in Philippi. The owners of this slave girl dragged them into the marketplace which was the seat of local government (v.19). They used racial prejudice to incite the crowd against them (v.20). Many Romans did not care for Jews. Only recently the Emperor had expelled all Jews from Rome. So they also appealed to Roman patriotism, as we see in v.21. And so in v.22 we see that the mob rose up against the apostles. If you want to cause trouble, just get a mob together and you can turn some men into a pack of dogs. Without due process, Paul and Silas were subjected to a common form of Roman punishment, which was to be beaten with a rod again and again. They did not just punish them and let them go, but they gave them over to the jailer who thrust them into the inner prison. In those days prison cells were often dug out of a stone cliff. They were often cold and dark. It was certainly a terrible place to be. To make matters worse, the jailer spread their feet apart and put their feet securely in stocks (v.24), which was a very uncomfortable position to have to stay in for long periods of time.

If great Christians like Paul and Silas faced difficult circumstances, then you can expect difficult circumstances:

B. In Your Life - Jesus said in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation...." He also said, "The poor you will always have with you." There will always be those who face the difficulty of poverty. You will face sickness in your life or the life of a loved one. You may have to work in a difficult work environment. You may face significant loss in your life such as losing a family member, losing your job, losing a friend, or losing some valuable part of your life. Some of my most difficult days in life were during Jr. High School. Do you remember those days? So the days of difficult circumstances are coming. You can hope that you will not face difficult circumstance too often. But the main point is that difficult days are coming and you can't completely protect yourself from them.

So the question is how are you going to deal with those difficult circumstances? How will you respond? After all, you cannot avoid bad circumstances. You can't insulate yourself from all problems. Now in order to know how you should respond to bad circumstances, you first need to recognize:

II. THE CAUSES OF BAD CIRCUMSTANCES

As I have indicated, when bad events come upon us, we often ask, "Why Lord?" Back in 1976 I crashed my car head on into a big Georgia pine tree, and I remember that that was the first question I asked. To top it off, I was on my way back from church that day! There are several reasons why difficult circumstances arise in our lives, and it is helpful to determine why it is happening so you can respond appropriately.

Sometimes bad circumstances are caused by:

A. Yourself - There are many people who simply bring trouble on themselves. They dig their own grave. Galatians 6:7-8 says "Be not deceived, God is not mocked. Whatever a man sows that shall he also reap." Most of the prisoners (v.25b) were in prison due to some crime *they* had committed. They really had no one to blame but themselves. Likewise, if you don't show up for work, or if you violate the rules at work, you could lose your job and you have no

one to blame but yourself. Yet so often we want to blame others for our difficult circumstances. However, there are times when we should admit that we have brought trouble on ourselves. For some time now we have been hearing about the “victims” of AIDS. Well sometimes people have been victims. They got the disease through a blood transfusion, or some other way through no fault of their own. But the vast majority of people with AIDS got it through immorality or drug abuse. Listen, don’t violate God’s moral principles and then expect to be exempt from the bad consequences.

So when bad circumstances happen due to your own sin, don’t blame your problems on others. That’s what Adam and Eve did. Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent. And instead of asking, “Why me, Lord?”, you need to ask, “Lord, are you seeking to correct me?” If so, confess it and forsake the sin. Then, that particular cause of bad circumstances will go away.

There is a second cause of bad circumstances in our lives:

B. Others – In the case of Paul and Silas, their bad circumstances were no fault of their own. They were just being obedient to the Lord. They were doing God’s work. They actually helped this young lady by casting this evil spirit out of her. So in their case, sinful men caused their bad circumstances, as we see in vv.19-22. And so Paul and Silas suffered terribly as a result. 1 Pet. 3:17 says, “For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.” And so there are times when you do good and yet you suffer difficult circumstances. Because we live in a sinful world, we will suffer. You may drive along in your car and be hit by some drunk driver. If that happens, you will suffer because of the sins of others. And so when we suffer and ask God “Why?” this must be our typical answer: Until God intervenes and puts an absolute stop to sin, then sin will continue in this world and thus suffering and death will continue.

When others bring suffering into our lives, we should ask God to help us to not become angry and bitter but forgiving. We should not pay evil for evil (Rom. 12:17).

Another reason we experience bad circumstances is simply because:

C. We Live in a Sin Cursed World - This world has been cursed because of sin (Genesis 3), and so some suffering is not the result of personal sin, but due to the curse of sin. You can blame that on Adam and Eve if you want to! A young child gets cancer, not because of personal sin, but because of being born into a sin-cursed world. But I’ve got good news. Rev. 22:3 says that after Jesus comes again, “there shall be no more curse....” And in Rev. 21:5 Jesus said, “Behold, I make all things new.” Oh, what a wonderful day that will be!

Now there is one more reason for our bad circumstances that we should consider:

D. God’s Purposes - For the most part I do not believe that God directly causes suffering to come into our lives. But since He is sovereign we must conclude that He allows suffering. Why does He do so in the life of a Christian? Surely it is because He can use our suffering for some higher good if we let Him. One key element in gaining victory over circumstances is having a strong confidence and faith in the ultimate purposes of God. Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

You see, there was a hidden purpose in God allowing Paul and Silas to suffer. He wanted to bless others through their suffering. You see, there was a jailer who needed Jesus Christ. His family needed Jesus Christ. The other prisoners needed salvation in Christ. Perhaps the only way

they would have been saved was to be confronted with the powerful witness of Paul and Silas, which would not have happened apart from their suffering. The way they expressed victory over their circumstances was a powerful witness for the Lord. Most people would not have paid one bit of attention to the words of Paul as he was witnessing to people in the community. Even when Paul and Silas were praising the Lord in jail, the jailer was sleeping. He wasn't even listening to that witness. He was an older, rugged retired Roman soldier. In his mind he did not care to listen to these religious fanatics. And so the only way for the Lord to reach this man was for Paul and Silas to undergo these terrible sufferings, and then for the jailer to face a terrible moment in his own life.

One time Jesus and His apostles were walking along and they saw a blind man. His apostles asked, "Who sinned? This man or his parents that he was born blind?" Jesus replied, "Neither, but that the glory of God would be manifest through him." Even so, Paul and Silas went through a difficult time, not because they had sinned but in order that the power of God would be manifest through them. And we know for sure that the saving power of God did work to bring about the salvation of the jailer and his household.

And so, when you face difficult circumstances, you should look for ways that God is going to work in your life to bring about some greater good. If you lose a job, perhaps He will use that circumstance to bring you into contact with someone who needs Jesus. If you get sick, perhaps there is a doctor or nurse or family member who needs your witness. He will often bring blessings through you unto others. Or if you lose a job perhaps there is someone at your next job that God wants you to be a witness to. Or He will build character in your own life through your suffering. James 1:2-4 says, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing." (See also Romans 5:3-4). And so, instead of complaining about our difficulties, we should put our absolute trust in the wisdom and goodness of our Heavenly Father that He knows best and that He has a higher purpose in your suffering.

There was a man who wanted to go into mission service but when they got to the health questions they discovered that his wife was not healthy enough for missionary service. The missionary board denied their application, so the couple returned home, brokenhearted. Of course, they asked the Lord why. Since he could not go as a missionary, he decided that he would earn extra money to send others who could go to the mission field. The young man's father had been making unfermented wine for their church's communion services. His son soon became involved with him. His name was Mr. Welch. They manufacture Welch's grape juice to this day. The company has given hundreds of thousands of dollars to missions. Instead of going to the mission field himself, he helped many others go to the mission field.

So when you go through bad circumstances, we need to understand that God has a purpose in it. You just need to fulfill God's purpose for your suffering.

Now let me share one more lesson as we consider:

III. THE CURE FOR BAD CIRCUMSTANCES

How are we to deal with bad circumstances? How can we be victorious over bad circumstances like Paul and Silas? Well first of all, I want to tell you:

A. How *Not* to Deal with Bad Circumstances – Don't use improper escape tactics. I say "improper" because at times common sense says that we should flee from bad situations. God told Joseph to "take the young Child and His mother [and] flee to Egypt..." to protect Jesus from King Herod (Mt. 2:13; see also Mt. 10:23; 24:16). If I meet up with Mr. Snake, I will not hang around to get friendly with him. I will escape that situation as quickly as I can. But so many people try to deal with difficult circumstances by escaping the problem in the wrong way, or prematurely. If God has a purpose in your bad circumstances, then it is not His will for you to escape those circumstances until that purpose has been fulfilled. For example, He may be correcting some sin in your life, or He may be seeking to build character in your life, or He may have some other purpose that you cannot even see. And if it is His will to deliver you from your trial, then His purpose would be to bring glory to His name through your deliverance. But we must place the whole matter in God's hand, and not seek to escape in the wrong way, or prematurely.

One of the *improper* escape tactics that we should not do is found right here in our text:

1. Suicide - This is how the Roman jailer was going to face his difficult circumstances. We read in v.27, "And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself." He did not want to face being tried and convicted of being irresponsible in his duties. The Roman Government was harsh. He probably would have been sentenced to death for what seemed to be allowing the prisoners to escape. And so we see that he, like many others in that day, planned to commit suicide as a way of dealing with a future without hope. Of course, you know that hundreds of thousands of people in America at least attempt suicide each year as a way to cope with the difficult circumstances. There is even a marked increase in attempted suicides by children and youth. Suicide is merely an escape tactic for those who either don't want to face up to their problems or feel that their problems are too great. But no matter how bad it gets in your life, suicide is not the answer! I'm sorry to say that most who commit suicide are escaping from the frying pan into the fire. If you ever contemplate suicide, give heed to the words of the apostle Paul in v.28, "Do yourself no harm."

2. Alcohol and Drugs - Millions of people turn to drugs and alcohol to help them cope with life's problems. They can't face their problems, they try to escape them. Drugs and alcohol will help you feel better for the moment, but it will really on make things worse the next morning, and in the long run.

There are other ways that people try to escape. Some simply withdraw into their own little world and become reclusive. Some will try to move away from their problems. Some lie their way out of trouble.

But these are not the answers. We can have victory over our circumstances through Jesus Christ. So how can we have victory?

B. How to Deal with Bad Circumstances:

1. Trust God - When you go through difficult circumstances you can trust God because He loves you. You may not feel like it at the time, but God proved His love to us when He sent Jesus to die for our sins on the cross (Romans 5:8). You can trust God knowing that He has the power to deliver you. God is greater than your problems. You can trust God because He is sovereign. He is on the throne of the universe, and nothing takes Him by surprise. And if God does not deliver you, He has a purpose in your suffering. You should simply trust God to do what is best in your life, and in the life of others. So trust Him to do what is best!

2. Pray to God – Notice in v.25 that “at midnight Paul and Silas were praying....” That’s how they responded to the bad circumstances they were facing. Even so, when we are in trouble, we should pray. James 5:13 says, “Is any among you afflicted? let him pray.” Then he said in the next verse, “Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him....” Paul wrote to these Philippian believers the following words, “be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, let your request be made known unto God” (4:6). Was Paul worried and troubled as he sat in jail? No! He already knew this truth and turned to God in prayer. So we should not worry about our difficult circumstances, but pray about them. Likewise, Peter said in 1 Peter 5:7, “casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.”

But we should not pray just when we are in trouble. Our prayers in trouble will be more effective if have been praying daily. Notice where Paul was going in v.16. He was going to prayer meeting. He was regular in his prayer life. And so if we will maintain a regular prayer life, I believe our prayers will be more effective when we face trials and difficulties. There was a time in the history of Israel when God told them that He would not hear their prayer. For too long they had forsaken the Lord and in their day of trouble the Lord refused to intervene. Too many people only pray when they are in trouble. So if you want to have effective prayer, don’t use prayer only as a last resort. Be regular in daily prayer, and then your prayers will be more effective in times of trouble.

Now when you face difficult circumstances, you can pray for one of two things to happen: First, you can pray that God will deliver you from the trial you face. Sometimes He will do that. He may immediately heal your sickness. He may miraculously help you out of a financial difficulty. In the case of Paul and Silas, it wasn’t long before God delivered them from prison. But, I think that most of the time it is not God’s will to quickly deliver us from our trials. So when we pray for deliverance and God says no, then we should pray for the strength and grace we need to endure our trials. Paul had an ongoing problem and he asked God to remove it three times, but God said, “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor. 12:9). In such times we should pray for His comfort. We should pray that God will use this trial for His own purposes and glory. We can also pray that we will learn whatever lessons God wants us to learn through it.

Finally, another way we can have victory over bad circumstances is:

3. Praise God - Scott preached about this Tuesday night. V.25 says that they were also “singing hymns to God.” Paul and Silas also became victorious over their circumstances through praise. They were not worried and overwhelmed by their difficulties. They were able to praise God in the midst of their difficulties. Paul wrote to these Philippians later “rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice” (4:4). He didn’t say rejoice only when things are going well. He said “rejoice in the Lord *always*....”

So how can we praise the Lord when we face trials? One way is by realizing that God is going to bring about some greater good through them. We can praise God for the truth of Romans 8:28. Furthermore, no matter how bad things get, there will always be something you can praise God for. Things could be worse. They were probably praising God that they were not killed by the mob. Furthermore, Satan could take away their comfort and health, but he couldn’t take their salvation! They could lock Paul and Silas in, but they couldn’t lock God out! They had plenty to praise God for. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God concerning you.” Look up, and think of what you can still praise God for. Furthermore, no matter how bad our circumstance, God has given us a certain hope. We can praise God that no matter how dark it gets, our future is bright in Jesus Christ. Even if you die,

God will immediately transfer you to a better place. Heaven is going to be wonderful, and nothing can take that away from us. The apostle Paul said, “To live is Christ, to die is gain.”

Now what happened when Paul and Silas trusted God, prayed, and praised God? They experienced a mighty victory. A midnight the cell began to shake, the doors were opened, the shackles and stocks were loosed, the jailor and his family were saved, and they were soon released from prison. What a victory!

Conclusion: Are you experiencing victory over circumstances, or are you being defeated by your circumstances. Well if you have been defeated, if you have been worried and depressed, then I want to challenge you to trust God, pray, and praise God. That is the pathway of victory. Perhaps you need to come to this prayer altar and just turn your burden over to the Lord in prayer. Or I will be happy to pray with you. I would not want to go through the trials of life without Jesus.

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); part of Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931); Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 441-422; Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Maier consulted, but not used.

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