

Is Your Joy Dependent upon How People Treat You?

Acts 16:16-25

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Is your joy dependent upon how people treat you? When your husband is kind and considerate or when you wife is pleasant and cooperative are you cheerful (or replace it with parents, children, boss, brother or sister in Christ), but when they are not affectionate, respectful, or cooperative, are you upset and feeling sorry for yourself? It is certainly easier (as to our human nature) to rejoice when people love and appreciate us, when there is money rolling in, and when we are living and working without pain and disabilities. However, it requires the Holy Spirit to subdue our nature and work supernaturally in our lives to praise the Lord with the fruit of joy when we feel abandoned, despised, unloved, and wracked with pain. It is a part of our sanctification in Christ to move beyond what we feel to rest in child-like trust that our Father in heaven is working out His purposes and even using the stinging remarks of others to crush our stubborn pride, vengeful anger, self-righteousness, self-defensiveness, and self-pity. Dear ones, those sins of the heart, speech, and conduct will destroy us if God does not destroy them through the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. Joy in the Lord is possible, even in the worst of circumstances. Do you hunger and thirst to see it realized in your life?

This supernatural work of grace of joy in the Lord was manifested in the lives of Paul and Silas (not in angelic beings)—who were earthly men subject to the same passions as you and me. We lose the battle of praising God at all times when we excuse ourselves and minimize the power of God’s Spirit by saying, “Well after all, they were apostles.” The same grace is yours today in Jesus. The main points this Lord’s Day are: (1) A Miraculous Healing Precedes Persecution (Acts 16:16-18); (2) Persecution Arises from the Loss of Financial Gain (Acts 16:19-24); (3) Joy Is Not Dependent upon How Others Treat You (Acts 16:25).

I. A Miraculous Healing Precedes Persecution (Acts 16:16-18).

A. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke have now arrived in Philippi of Macedonia, and the first recorded convert to Christ was Lydia, a woman whose heart was supernaturally opened to hear and believe the gospel preached by Paul. She was then baptized together with her household (Acts 16:14-15—which would include small children if any were a part of her household—for “household” or *oikos* does not exclude small children but rather includes them).

B. Moving on now to our text for today, the power of the resurrected Christ brings the miraculous deliverance of a demon-possessed girl whom Satan had enslaved to divination and fortune telling (Acts 16:16-18). As Paul and his team ministered in Philippi, they are confronted by this young girl possessed with an evil spirit of divination who follows them for several days (Acts 16:18). What do these few verses tell us about this poor enslaved girl?

1. First, she was a damsel or young girl (Acts 16:16—perhaps in her teens or early twenties)—not an aged woman.

2. Second, she was possessed with a spirit of divination (Acts 16:16—literally, “having a spirit of Python”).

a. What is a spirit of Python? The Greek pagan world looked to Delphi in Northern Greece as the place where they could receive revelation from the god Apollo about their lives and about the future. This temple in Delphi was said to be guarded by Python, the female serpent. So a woman possessed by demons who enchanted her clients with supposed knowledge about their lives or about the future was said to be a pythoness through whom Apollo spoke.

b. How this young girl came to be so possessed we are not told, but perhaps it began with a curiosity about the mysterious and dark power of the occult (that is why we must not play with games that are gateways into the occult—it is gradual with many like a drug, desensitizing them until they are swallowed up). Satan is not omniscient, only God knows all things past, present, and future. But Satan does have the ability to give knowledge about others to those who crave that power and are willing to sell their soul to him in order to have it. However it happened, this young girl was enslaved by the enemy.

c. What a pitiful situation to think of your young daughter or young granddaughter trapped in this daily net of the devil. But, dear ones, this is what sin does to all of humanity—it enslaves, it corrupts, and it destroys. We may not have been possessed by Satan before our conversion, but we were enslaved to do his will—thinking all along that we were doing our own will—that is the deceit of the enemy (2 Timothy 2:26).

3. Third, we learn that this young girl was not only enslaved by Satan, but was enslaved by money-hungry masters who used her and abused her for their own personal gain and likely their own pleasure (Acts 16:16). She was not loved, nor cared for, but was like an animal to be used and abused by her masters. How this adds further to the deplorable state of this young girl, who had no idea where her initial introduction into the occult would lead her (this is where the love of the world, the love of fleshly desires, the love of power, the love of the approval of man leads—it leads to bondage, not to freedom—freedom is in Jesus alone).

4. Fourth, as she followed Paul and his team, she repeated the message that is found in Acts 16:17. Was this message one of truth or error? That is not so easy to determine.

a. First, some commentators focus on her message as promoting one of many ways to salvation (“which shew unto us A WAY OF SALVATION”—the Greek definite article is not used before “way”). If this is the case, it reveals the subtlety of Satan in deceiving so many today—“there are many ways to God, choose the one that best suits you.” This is a damnable heresy. As Bible-believing Christians, we do not worship the same God as Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Mormons, or JWs (that is the problem with a national day of thanksgiving in our country).

b. Second, some commentators state that her message was accurate in itself, but that she was by her voice in some way ridiculing and making fun of the truth which was obvious to all.

c. Third, still other commentators state her message was accurate and that she was forced to cry out the truth under compulsion of the Holy Spirit (just as demons during the ministry of Christ were forced to do, Mark 1:24). This would demonstrate the mighty power of God over all satanic power—that not only must Satan and his cohorts leave when commanded by the power of Jesus Christ, but must also confess that Jesus is the Holy One sent by God.

d. Though it may not be clear which of these options best represents what the young girl was declaring and how she was declaring it, nevertheless, it becomes clear that the Lord had mercy upon her and delivered her from Satan and her masters that had enslaved her.

C. After stalking Paul and his team for several days, Paul was grieved and troubled over this poor young girl’s state and words, and he commands the demon to come out of her immediately, which it does (Acts 16:18).

1. This was a judgment against the forces of the devil, but was an act of mercy to this young girl who was delivered. Though we do not have specific words to the effect of her trusting in the Lord Jesus for her salvation, it would seem that she was delivered in order to be saved and not to be condemned. What a glorious deliverance! She was set free by the power of the resurrected Jesus Christ. This is the same power that has saved you who trust in Him by faith alone. This is the same power that continues to deliver you from the world, the flesh, and the devil.

2. When we act as though we cannot overcome some besetting sin in our lives, we are denying the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we fail so many times that we begin to believe there is no hope. That is the devil speaking—that is doubt speaking—that is unbelief speaking. This is God speaking: 1 Corinthians 10:13; Romans 6:13. As so often happens, when God works some mighty act of blessing, the enemy is right around the corner waiting to rob us of the joy of that blessing (just as we see here with Paul and Silas).

II. Persecution Arises from the Loss of Financial Gain (Acts 16:19-24).

A. Not everyone was rejoicing at this young girl's deliverance—particularly, her masters' were not at all happy. They were full of vengeful anger, for their goose that laid golden eggs was gone and they were forced to actually work to support themselves.

1. You see, not all persecution arises from a direct, public disagreement over the truth—that may be the ultimate reason from the perspective of the devil who hates the truth of Jesus Christ and will use any means to silence it. In this instance the persecution against Paul and Silas arose directly from the loss of financial gain when the young girl was delivered from demonic possession (the same happens in Acts 19 when the idol and image makers of the goddess, Dianna, turn the city of Ephesus into an uproar over the loss of revenue because many were turning to Christ away from serving pagan idols and images).

2. Persecution may arise against us as Bible-believing Christians for various reasons, but behind it all is Satan's attempt to silence the truth of Jesus Christ. We may be accused and persecuted for hustling the company and affecting morale because we will not work on the Lord's Day. We may be accused and persecuted for treason because we will not blindly submit for conscience sake to an unlawful oath from the civil government. We may be accused and persecuted for family disloyalty because we will not follow them in disobedience against the commands of God. So we see here in Acts 16:19 that all persecution does not arise immediately from a public debate over the truth found in Scripture, although that is ultimately the source of the persecution—a rebellion against Christ, His gospel, and His law.

B. The vengeful and hateful anger of these wicked masters is evidenced in the way that Paul and Silas were treated (Timothy and Luke were probably not included in these cruel and unjust acts because Timothy was half-Greek and Luke was a Roman). Paul and Silas are dragged to the marketplace (the agora), which was like a central square in the midst of the city where were markets and where the offices of the magistrates were as well (Acts 16:19).

1. The charge is now changed from their financial loss which would sound to self-serving to one that the magistrates would find more important to the peace and security of the city—"these are Jews who have come to disrupt our quiet, peaceful town with their religious views that are contrary to the laws of the Romans" (Acts 16:20-21). In effect, Paul and Silas are just troublemakers that are stirring up the people against our national laws and customs as Romans (national pride).

2. The same charge of being a troublemaker was brought by wicked King Ahab against Elijah when the Lord brought a three-year drought upon Israel for Israel's idolatry, wickedness, and covenant-breaking (1 Kings 18:17-18). It's not necessarily the few or the minority that is the troublemaker that causes a division. It may be the majority that departs from the truth. It is always easier to simply brand someone as a troublemaker because we do not want to listen to the truth or to another possible idea or to a legitimate complaint. But at the same time we must be ever so cautious that we are seeking to present the truth, or our idea, or a complaint in a way that is not filled with vengeful anger, bitterness, arrogance, or disrespect. Our reformed forefathers were designated as troublemakers when they were actually peacemakers seeking to remove false doctrine, corrupt worship, and tyrannical church government out of the Visible Church.

3. Without any trial, a mob was stirred up, and the magistrates stripped Paul and Silas of

their outer garments and had them unjustly and mercilessly caned with rods and with many stripes (there was no limit among the Romans unlike with the Jews—Deuteronomy 25:3; 2 Corinthians 11:24). After unjustly being bruised, bloodied, and beaten so severely, they were not released, but were cast into prison into the inner dungeon without light from outside and their feet were placed in painful stocks. The prisons of those times were worse in many ways than undergoing a cane beating, because they were so unsanitary with human urine and feces (especially being in stocks), with dampness, no light, rats, and disease. For many, death was preferred over being placed in such a prison. There were Paul and Silas in horrendous circumstances, hated and despised by men, but greatly loved by God who was working by His providence to bring about the salvation of the jailer who had not tended to their bloody backs, who had locked them in painful stocks, and had locked them away perhaps to die in the inner dungeon. From the joy of seeing this young girl delivered from bondage to Satan, Paul and Silas were treated with the most unjust and cruel hatred. And we think we have been mistreated, abused, and not loved by others.

III. Joy Is Not Dependent upon How Others Treat You (Acts 16:25).

A. Paul and Silas, severely weakened, with bruised, bloody, and raw backs, their ankles crammed tightly inside the stocks that were not only used to secure prisoners, but to add to their pain, are found spewing forth curses against those who so cruelly mistreated them. No, that is not what we read. They were praying aloud and singing praises (no doubt Psalms—like Psalm 95:1-6) unto the Lord. They were not embittered. They were not looking for personal revenge. They were rejoicing in the Lord—the joy of the Lord was their strength. Their joy was not connected to how they were treated with malice, with hatred, or with cruelty. Their joy was not found in this world, but was found in Christ.

B. How were Paul and Silas enabled to rejoice and praise God in such awful circumstances?

1. First, if their focus and sight was upon themselves and what they had suffered, they would not be ready to rejoice and praise God. They had to consciously resolve to turn away from their pain and heartache and to turn in faith to the Lord Jesus, to His suffering for them, to His love for them, and to His benefits purchased for them. We cannot be filled with bitterness, with vengeful anger, with self-pity, and yet rejoice in the Lord. If we cannot see Jesus in what we suffer, we will never be able to praise the Lord with hearts filled with joy. That learned and faithful martyr at 26 years of age, Rev. James Renwick, was chased like a wild animal, a bounty upon his head, and hated by those who could not tolerate the truth of Jesus Christ and a covenanted reformation that He preached. He wrote the following in one of his letters at this time.

For my part, it is my study not to be bitter against the bitterness of others, not to be reviled into a reviler, nor scoffed into a scoffer, so as to return the same to others as they are to me, neither to throw back my brother's fire-balls into his own face, lest in censuring him I also be my own judge. Though the sourness of others offend me, yet it should not. But I will quiet my spirit in waiting upon the Lord, until He bring forth the righteousness of His cause, and the innocence of His servants (*Life and Letters of James Renwick*, W.H. Carslaw, p.222).

2. Second, if Paul and Silas were asking, "Why?" or "What have we done to deserve this?" they would not be ready to rest in the sovereign and loving purposes of God who is all wise and never makes a mistake. They could not be fighting with God over His plan for their lives, and at the same time rejoicing in the Lord. Dear ones, as long as we think we have a better plan for our lives than God has, we are guaranteed to be miserable, joyless, unthankful, and we will make everyone around know it and feel it as well. Joy in the Lord comes from resting like a little baby in the strong arms of his/her Heavenly Father. Our confusion, our conflicts, our fears, our anxieties do not shatter His divine peace. There is no restlessness or anxiety over His

plan for you and me. It is a plan tailored to you and me specifically. And though the plan for your life will not be the same as the plan for my life, it will bring every single child of God who trusts alone in Christ alone to the exact same end—everlasting joy where sin, pain, tears, and death will be no more.

3. Third, if Paul and Silas only looked to what this world offered, they would not be praying and praising God in those agonizing circumstances. However, Paul and Silas looked beyond this world to the glories of their heavenly inheritance in Christ. They communed with Christ though in pain, and hoped in Christ though cruelly abused and mistreated. Their hope was not in this world, but was in the heavenly world where there is no more sin, pain, tears, or rejection, but rather peace, love, and joy forever (Philippians 1:21).

C. Dear ones, don't say to yourself, "It sounds great, but I can't do it. It is not possible in my circumstances. You don't know what I am facing." That may be true, I don't know. But there is One that does know, and through His apostle He says you can do it (Philippians 4:13). That is not Christ speaking that you should give up. That is Satan, the father of lies speaking. Dear ones, this grace of joy in the Lord will not be manifested easily, but we can/will grow in this grace of praising God in the all trials and pain and heartache, if we practice what has been said above. I leave you with one more thought from that young, bright star, James Renwick, whom God used as an example of faithfulness and joy in the face of such hatred and persecution for the truth of Jesus Christ.

Rejoice in your light affliction which is but for a moment. Count your antagonists your greatest friends, for what are they doing by all the storms they raise against you, but contributing to the mass of your glory? O fear them not, but keep your Captain-General upon your right hand, and then cry to them to shoot their fill (*Life and Letters of James Renwick*, W.H. Carshaw, p.170).

Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice (Philippians 4:4).

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