

## **The weapon of rejoicing**

Reading: Acts 16:16-34

How many of us here today can give a testimony like this one? I don't think I am being unfair if I say that none of us could get even close. I also believe I can be pretty safe in saying that none of us have been flogged, or put in prison for our faith. But what about even responding the way that Paul and Silas did to a situation in your life that was desperately bleak?

I want you to put yourself into v24 in your mind. You are Paul or Silas, and you have been put in prison for your faith.

v22 says they were stripped and beaten. They were then placed in the inner cell and their feet were fastened in stocks. Clearly Paul and Silas were not going anywhere. Following a beating a guard was placed to watch them closely. That's how seriously this was being taken.

How would you be feeling at this point? I can tell you that in this situation I would not be in any mood for celebration and would suggest that neither would you.

Week after week we meet in our churches to spend time in worship and in prayer. Because we have had it deeply ingrained in us over and over we know that prayer is the most powerful tool at our disposal to deal with times of trouble and adversity. No one would dispute that. If we belong to Christ but do not pray we will soon be overcome with difficulties and struggles we cannot cope with. Many of them will seem overwhelming. Our personal life with Christ will be littered with frustration and we will find ourselves struggling and doubting our faith.

So the effectiveness of our Christian lives is very dependant on the effectiveness of our prayer life. The two are directly related, and I'm sure it comes as no surprise to hear me say that. However I believe that the story we read today demonstrates how the effectiveness of prayer can be greatly increased by understanding how we can use biblical weapons of Spiritual warfare that are there waiting for us to discover.

The problem is that while these weapons are scattered throughout God's word it seems that we are not always that good at recognising them. One of these principles of Spiritual warfare is evident in the story we read this morning. I wonder if you identified it there.

We marvel at the story we read; how Paul and Silas had such awesome experiences. But let's not miss the point that these things didn't just happen to them so that God could put something into the book of Acts for us to read 2000 years later and get excited about.

This happened because Paul and Silas applied principles of spiritual warfare that worked then and work today, and will work every bit as well for you and me if only we realize the fact and apply them.

By v24 Paul and Silas were bruised, beaten, stripped, humiliated; not only imprisoned in a cell but the innermost cell; top security, and their feet were fastened in stocks. What would you do? I think if we are honest most of us would cry out to the Lord in anguish with something like this:  
God release us from what we are suffering. Hear our prayer and help us. Deliver us from our pain. We pray against this injustice, against all that has come against us. Deliver us from those who have wronged us. Bring us justice for this is not fair.

Have you ever prayed that sort of prayer? It's not fair what I am going through. I've been faithful to you God. And this is too much for me to bear. Have you ever prayed like that? I know I have.

Now do not think for one moment that I'm suggesting there is anything wrong with praying that way. In fact there are times when a life situation is so desperate that we can see no way out of it. Sometimes this type of prayer is the only sort of prayer that we feel we can pray. There are times when the pain is so big it would be artificial to pray without tears and pleas to be delivered from what we are going through.

When we call out to God this way He hears the anguish; He responds to it. We cry out in desperation, and we cry out in the agony of where we are because there is no other answer. There is no future but God.

Nor would I want you to think I am suggesting God is less interested in that sort of prayer. The prayer of anguish from the depth of the heart is mirrored in the Bible many times and it is totally appropriate to cry out to God in our distress. God just wants us to communicate with Him and prayer is the way we do that. God ignores **no** prayer.

But let me introduce something else; something that we don't necessarily appreciate the power of. Paul and Silas prayed that night from a position that we would see as hopeless and potentially life threatening; and what sort of prayer did they pray?

V25 says... Instead of complaining or calling on God to judge their enemies and release them from their predicament, the two men just prayed and praised God singing hymns. I've got to be honest here and admit that when I am in pain, midnight is not a time I would choose for a sacred concert, but this did not stop Paul and Silas.

They were praying and singing hymns to God! Paul and Silas were in full on worship! These were not heavy agonised prayers; not prayers of anguish and self pity. These were prayers of victory, of praise, and of joy. Their attitude was akin to the attitude of us when we are right in the midst of our worship time in a church service.

And what happened? V26.... God moved! Miracles happened! Prison doors don't just fly open. Chains don't come loose. But they do when God moves and they did this day! Prayer and praise are powerful weapons. God responded by shaking the foundations of the prison, opening all the doors, and loosening the prisoners' bonds.

Even the other prisoners were stunned. Those prisoners could have fled to freedom, but instead they remained right where they were. The prisoners would have realized that there was something very different going on here, something quite weird, and something that was way beyond anything they had experienced ever before!

God moves when the sons and daughters of his kingdom act in Kingdom Faith. He moves when they take their minds off the restrictions of the way of the world and act in the boundaries of God's principles. And the Kingdom principle we see at work here is what I am coining 'the Spiritual weapon of Praise and Rejoicing'.

Phil 3:1 says 'rejoice in the Lord'.

Phil 4:4 says 'rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again; rejoice'.

1 Thess 5:16 says 'rejoice always'.

And 'always' always means always.

Over and over the scriptures encourage us, urge us, even compel us to rejoice. But what we so often miss is that we are not just called to rejoice in good times, but in the hard times too. Rejoice in the Lord always. Praise God and never stop praising.

Maybe you are handling tough times in your life just now. Even if you aren't you have been through tough times haven't you? Pray hard in these times of course. And don't hold back - let the Lord hear your pain. But we can learn to go further. Don't stop short. Bring rejoicing in to your time of discouragement. Praise God when everything is going right, and praise Him when the bottom falls out of your life.

Did I say when the bottom falls out of your life? Why would we praise him when our life is full of deep pain, and how can we? We are going to answer both those questions this morning. Firstly lets look at why.

**Why?** Because God empowers us through rejoicing. Rejoicing is normally something that people do when everything is going right. But the big difference here between the Christian and the non believer is that the Christian is able, even exhorted, to rejoice when things are going wrong.

Things don't always go right do they? And when things are falling apart around us rejoicing is not what comes to mind. But that's the point. That's what makes it so powerful. Once you fully understand what I want to share with you in a moment I urge you to take it on and prove it to yourself. We may need convincing but the bible certainly doesn't - the bible is full of it. It wouldn't be so prodigiously mentioned throughout scripture if it wasn't such a powerful tool.

But **how** do you praise God when the bottom has fallen out of your life? I can almost hear the thought going through your mind, what about when a loved one dies. What about in the midst of tragedy. Aren't there times when rejoicing does not fit? And the answer to that is clearly 'yes, there are'. In Romans 9:2 we even read Paul writing "I have great sorrow and anguish in my heart". Yet Paul is the same one who wrote "rejoice always". David pours out grief in the Psalms and God responds mightily to that grief.

What we need to 'get' is what Paul is saying to us when he says over and over "rejoice always". This is not a rule that we need to learn, not a mantra we need to whip ourselves up with, and rejoicing is not discipline we need to somehow artificially manufacture. That would simply be false and legalistic.

Rejoicing is a gift given to us by the Holy Spirit when we live in total faith. When we live in total faith we are able to trust God that the situation that we are in is something He is totally aware of; and that He is has plans for us in that situation that as yet we are just not aware of.

We rejoice because we can know God is up to something, and that something involves us. We can rejoice because we can trust him in that we are part of the plan.

When we understand this we can rejoice in our down times by having faith that God will not leave us there. As we rejoice in our down times God is able to do power packed things that otherwise would not happen. We will be empowered by Him, we will see miracles happen, we will overcome situations in victory and in the meantime we will have come through the worst times of the situation in complete peace.

There is huge power in God's spiritual weapon of rejoicing.

The next thing that rejoicing does is that it takes your mind off yourself. Looking after ourselves is not only our natural instinct it is very much the message of the world today. Many Counsellors will direct us to look after ourselves first. And we characteristically bring that "me" focus into how we live out our Christian lives.

The quickest way to limit the power of God's Spirit is to spend your time seeking your own personal blessing, and focusing on yourself. We too often come into the presence of God with our first priority being to satisfy ourselves rather than to worship God. We even go shopping for churches to find one that suits us; one that we feel comfortable in rather than to find one to which God is calling us so that we can bring glory to Him.

The Christian life does include a lot of personal blessing. But paradoxically seeking it is not the way to get it. Blessing comes as a by product of service, of sacrifice and pouring out ourselves for others. It comes as we put total faith and trust in God to deliver us from each and every situation that we face.

Paul and Silas did not focus on themselves. Their priorities were on God first and foremost; and then to spread the Word of the Gospel. Any blessing they received was wonderfully enjoyed but it was never what they sought. Blessing came as a by product of their selfless service for Christ.

But rejoicing when they were put in prison? To us the very thought is outside of our thinking. Praising God in these circumstances is opposite to our natural instincts but it wasn't for Paul and Silas. We should not be surprised that God responds in big ways to big faith; God is not only the God of the natural He is also God of the supernatural. And it's the supernatural where we see His power and authority.

I want to share the words of John Piper, words that he spoke out in a song called "though you slay me" that I downloaded on Utube - He said this: "Not only is your affliction momentary; not only is all your affliction light in comparison to eternity and the glory there but all of it is totally meaningful. Every millisecond of your pain, every millisecond of your misery in the path of obedience is producing a peculiar glory you will get because of that.

I don't care if it was cancer or criticism. I don't care if it was slander or sickness. It's not meaningless. Of course you can't see what it is doing. But don't look to what is seen. When your mum dies, when your child dies; when a car crashes into the footpath and takes a loved one out. Don't say it's meaningless. It's not. It's working for you an eternal weight of glory. Therefore, do not lose heart.

But take these truths and day by day focus on them. Preach them to yourself every morning. Get alone with God and preach His word into your mind until your heart sings with confidence that you are new and cared for".

When you understand this and live by it you are living in fullness of faith. 'Rejoice always' now makes sense.

Look what happened in our story in the space of less than 24 hours. There was a rigged trial. They were beaten, flogged, and thrust into deepest darkness and despair. They prayed but in that prayer they trusted God so completely that they were able to sing, praise and rejoice in their suffering. God responded, but not in some meek partial way. He gave them the whole hog!

Earthquakes, broken chains, locked doors were hurled open. The works! I wonder how often God has wanted to give us the works but we have prevented Him from giving it to us by failing to call on the weapons at our disposal to demolish strongholds. Instead we allow ourselves to wallow in the unfairness of our situation when God is waiting for us to show our faith and believe Him to deal with it.

Pray in your trouble, yes. But rejoice in the victory that He will bring because you know that what you are going through has meaning.

What happens when we add rejoicing? Miracles happen! Lives around us change. That day a jailor was ready to kill himself one moment, then the next moment he fell at the feet of those two men pleading for the salvation that these men were preaching. He was supposed to be the one in authority, the one who had the power, but now it was he who bowed in humble submission to a power he did not understand.

The jailer had witnessed that crazy trial and their unfair treatment. He had watched as they remained unfazed by it and praised the God they knew they could trust. He had never seen anything like this before, and without hesitation he gave his life to the Lord.

He washed their wounds, fed them, and in an attitude of joy saw his whole family won for Christ. More miracles, more rejoicing, but this time the rejoicing was the result of victory. Oh the power of the weapon of rejoicing.

There is a time for praying inwardly and asking for your own blessing. But don't stop there. I urge you to break out from the pattern of what God can do for 'me' and into praying prayer where you, in faith, expect victory and pray accordingly. Where you pray with rejoicing and praise.

What it will do will blow your mind. It will work miracles in situations you thought were impossible. It will turn people to God as they witness the way you react in tense and troubled situations, and it will do something in your life that you never expected. You will receive the blessing that you thought you would only ever receive by asking God's with 'bless me' prayers. You will discover that it will change you too.