

“Pray and Sing at Midnight and Trust in God”
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Isaiah 12
Acts 16:16-40

One of the highlights, if not the highlight of the New Testament lesson today is verse 25, where the author of Acts writes, “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.”¹ Paul and Silas are praising God even though they were in jail on trumped up charges. They were only charged with crimes because the owners of the slave made a stink with the authorities and Paul and Silas were arrested. The injustice of being imprisoned wrongly was made even worse by the beating they took. They were stripped and beaten with rods. By the time midnight came along, they’d been suffering in a jail cell and been clobbered physically because they got in the way of someone’s income. And yet, there they were in prison, and they’re singing hymns and praying to God.

How many of us are praying and singing hymns to God when we are in pain and suffering? How many of us are praying and singing hymns when someone spreads false information about us? Or accuses us of doing something we didn’t do? Or judges us, without knowing what we are going through?

And another amazing thing about this verse about Paul and Silas is with their prayer and singing, they are not asking for anything. They are not praying to be released from prison, are they? There is no other verse that says they were praying to God to release them. Because after their singing and prayer and the earthquake when the doors of the prison were flung open and the shackles on them dropped off, they do a strange thing, don’t they? They do nothing. Surely if they were praying to be released and it happened, they would’ve left. But they didn’t.

What they were focused on was praying and singing hymns in that moment for the glory of God. That’s all. They weren’t asking for anything. They trusted in and glorified God. My New International Version study Bible says, “They could praise God because their joy was not based on circumstances but on a relationship. Jesus Christ and his love and grace are the same, no matter where you are or what is happening to you.”²

One of the hymns Paul and Silas sang might be Isaiah 12 that Johnnie read earlier. The Song of praise in the Isaiah reading calls for glorifying God “Although you were angry with me,” for clearly something I did was against you and your law, but even with all that, you forgave me of my sins against you.³ “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid.”⁴ “I will trust and not be afraid.” Whew. That’s a lot to ask, but Paul and Silas did it. They were in

¹ Acts 16:25, NRSV

² NIV study bible, 2015, Zondervan, p. 1191.

³ Isaiah 12:1, NRSV

⁴ Isaiah 12:2, NRSV.

prison, and they weren't looking to break out. They prayed to God and sang hymns. They trusted in God, and they counted on God to be their salvation.

They sing and pray because they trust in God, the way Isaiah trusted in God. They trust that God knows best. That there is a reason they're in that prison, although they may not see it at the time. Even in these awful circumstances they trust and glorify God. I can't help but think of our Westminster Catechism that asks the question, what is the chief end of man? It is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. It is clear Paul was living up to the first part of that catechism answer. He and Silas in their prayer and singing of hymns are glorifying God in an ugly place and under ugly circumstances. They are suffering. Which begs the question, why did they suffer? They suffered because they were Christian. In the name of Jesus Christ, Paul called the spirit out of the woman. They disturbed the order of things for the woman's owners, and they were arrested because of that. It was unfair and unjust. But Jesus warned his followers that they might suffer because they were followers of him. Here was an example of Paul suffering for his belief in Christ and his missionary work.

Scripture indicates that Paul at times became very discouraged and was concerned for his own life and the sufferings he endured along the way in his missionary journeys. In 2 Corinthians 1:8, Paul writes to the church in Corinth about his sufferings:

"We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself."⁵

Paul and his fellow missionaries despaired of life itself. How often we have despaired of life itself? I know some of us, perhaps all of us, have despaired in life itself at times. Yet, here we are, today. Let us remember to be like Paul and Silas and remember we can find comfort in praying and singing songs to the Lord. They trusted in God, and not themselves, or other people. They found joy in believing in Jesus Christ and his unending love for us and his promise of salvation for us, that death will not have the last word for us.

This story from Acts has a lesson for us to remember. Through illness and unfairness, and injustice, we are called to follow the example of Paul and Silas in prison. How can we lean on God to get us through those times? How can we get through them with as much grace and dignity as we can?

We can do what Paul and Silas did. We can pray to God and sing hymns to God. It is something we can try. It is something we can strive to do. Paul and Silas' prayers and hymn singing were acts of defiance. They were acts of hope that something else beyond the present moment of suffering was on the way. It was the hope and prayer of salvation. Paul knew the Hebrew scriptures so well that surely, he knew the song of praise in Isaiah 12. His prayers and singing were acts of hope. He had hope. He prayed and sang and had hope.

⁵ 2 Cor. 1:8

I don't sing at midnight nearly enough. Do you sing at midnight very much? I don't trust in God nearly as much as I would like. Do you trust in God? Or are you trying to control situations and people and playing God yourselves? Even if your motives are good?

I want to sing more at midnight. I want to trust in God, that God is in charge and God's helping me along.

Paul and Silas' comfort, hope, and joy was in the praise of God. That was all they were doing.

"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them."⁶

Let us remember to sing at midnight and pray the way Paul and Silas did.

We sing at midnight because we trust in God. Trusting in God is so much more powerful than fear, resentment, and pain.

Our hope and trust in God is a protest against all that is difficult, tragic, and evil in the world. We can say to each other that news about war and famine overseas is not going to have the last word on my life. I will not give in to the fear, anger, and poison that infects our world. Prayer and singing at midnight is going to be my protest against famine and hate in the United States. Prayer and singing is going to be my protest against the scourge of drug trafficking in our area with the poison of illegal fentanyl. Prayer and song are going to be my protest against inequality. Prayer and singing are my protest against despair.

In the face of suffering Paul and Silas prayed, they sang. May it be so for us as well. Let us pray more just to pray and talk to God. Let us sing more to God, for the sake of praising God's glory. Amen.

⁶ Acts 16:25, NRSV