



**Thank You: Always
Group Curriculum
November 27, 2016
Sermon Passage: Psalm 95:1-11
Curriculum Passage: Acts 16:22-31**

Introduction

My favorite thing about this time of year is the observance of Thanksgiving Day. Thanksgiving has become something that is markedly different than its intended purpose when it was initially established as a national holiday. Certainly, it still holds some of those values with regard to setting aside a specific time to remember how blessed we are. However, in addition to that, there are so many other hallmark happenings connected to Thanksgiving Day that compete with the originally intended purpose. It has become the preparation day for the Christmas shopping season, occurring immediately prior to Black Friday and Cyber Monday. In addition, for rabid sports fans like me, it also marks the extended weekend of potentially critical football matchups. Mixed in with these is the anxiety, frustration, and hurry of holiday travel on the busiest flying days of the year. As a note of confession, with the exception of the shopping piece, I love all of it.

The most interesting part of Thanksgiving, though, is the manner in which we talk about Thanksgiving in the public arena. Grocery stores and retailers seem to be unsure in how to address the thankfulness for which the holiday is named. One prominent ad in this year's observance features a variety of settings in which people are standing or seated in a circle holding hands, with heads bowed, but they never actually mention prayer or God. They list things they are thankful for, but there is no mention of the one to whom they are expressing thanks. They acknowledge blessing, but not the Blesser.

Part of the reason is the increasing reticence with which we speak of Christianity in our culture. However, that is not the particular axe I wish to grind at this point. As we think about Thanksgiving, I'm more concerned about the awareness with which we acknowledge the Blesser over the blessing. Truthfully, sometimes the blessings can be hard to detect. In those seasons, can we still acknowledge God with thankfulness and a grateful heart? As we close our *Thank You* series, we'll look at a passage that demonstrates the possibility and power of always being thankful.

Biblical Background

As we mentioned in last week's study, Acts is the second volume in Luke's two-volume work that chronicled the earthly ministry of Jesus and the birth of the Church following His resurrection. Specifically, Acts begins with the final instructions to His followers that, when they are filled with the power of the coming Holy Spirit, they will be His witnesses throughout the world. Following that instruction, the Holy Spirit comes upon the believers during Pentecost. As the believers speak in tongues previously unknown to them so that all attending Pentecost hear the Gospel in their own language, Peter preaches a sermon resulting in 3,000 people coming to Christ. The new church was born.

Following the events of Pentecost, Acts chronicles the growth and expansion of the body of believers. One of the greatest things about the biblical record is its honesty regarding events and people appearing on its pages. There is no effort to conceal brokenness, cover up sin, or glaze over the growing pains of the Church. As the Church grows, we are brought face-to-face with the duplicitous greed of Ananias and Sapphira, the ethnic prejudice between the Jewish and Hellenistic widows in food distribution, the martyrdom of Stephen, the persecution of the Church, how the Church grapples with the Gospel extending to Gentiles, the initial skepticism of the other believers when Saul (Paul) emerges as an apologist and evangelist, and the missionary endeavors of Paul with his various co-laborers.

As the Gospel spreads from city to city, region to region, throughout the Roman Empire, the reader also witnesses the incredible physical and spiritual cost of Paul's faithfulness to his calling as a missionary to the Gentiles. With each new locale, there is also a new rejection and opposition to the Gospel's advance. Reading 2 Corinthians 11 is a graphic reminder of the variance with which the persecution found Paul and his companions. Still, even as the hardship increases in frequency and severity, Paul is resilient in the Lord as he faithfully presses on. Our passage this week highlights the centrality of worship in fortifying Paul against the discouragement of persecution.

The Text

In carrying out their missionary calling in Philippi, Paul and Silas are harangued by a slave girl that was calling out in a loud voice, announcing that Paul and Silas were from God and preaching the way of salvation. This went on for days to the point of great annoyance for Paul and Silas. Such a proclamation would have made the covert nature of their presence in Philippi impossible to maintain, exposing them to great risk of being arrested. The girl, who had a demon's spirit of divination, is healed by Paul's authoritative word in the Holy Spirit. The evil spirit is gone, as is the annoyance of her constant crying out. However, the fortune-telling that was a result of the evil spirit was used as a source of income for the girl's owners. Realizing the loss of their fortune, the girl's owners incite a riot in the marketplace against Paul and Silas, utilizing a series of false charges and involving the local magistrates.

"The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks."

(Acts 16:22-24)

This collection of verses details the result of Paul casting the spirit out of the girl. Paul and Silas, accused of causing civil unrest and insurrection, are stripped in the public square and beaten with rods. The rods referred to are called lictors' rods, as they are wielded by the official attendants of the magistrates, who are called lictors. The rods were actually several bundled rods – occasionally with a small ax inserted among the rods for more severe beatings – used to publicly punish and humiliate those outsiders that would dare disrupt the culture of Roman cities.

After the mob scene beating was over, with Paul and Silas covered in bruises and likely broken bones, they are turned over to the jailer. The jailer would have been a retired soldier in the Roman military, since Philippi was a Roman outpost for retired soldiers. The jailer's job was to inflict as much discomfort and cramping on his prisoners as possible. The stocks were not like the stocks we normally think of, with one hole for each arm and leg. These stocks had multiple openings so that the jailer could contort and strain prisoners' limbs in the most excruciating way he could imagine at varying angles and lengths. Such cramping of the legs ensured not only a healthy fear of Roman imprisonment, but also that prisoners would no longer have the necessary mobility to escape. For all of their sophistication and elegance, the Romans were masters of torture and imprisonment. In light of that, what happens next seems all but inconceivable.

*"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's bonds were unfastened."
(Acts 16:25-26)*

Of all the sounds one would expect to come from the innermost cell of a Roman prison, singing was definitely not one of them. Cries of agony, groaning, cursing, grumbling, and whimpering would have been common sounds from prisoners in such misery. Paul and Silas, though, even in the middle of the night, were singing praises to God. Interestingly, Luke writes that the other inmates were listening to them. There is no sense that they were shushing them or reviling them in any way. Perhaps it was because of the amazement of a joyous sound being present in a place of such dire hopelessness. Perhaps the hymns they sang brought comfort to those who shared their current affliction. Whatever the case, the joyous sounds of praise and prayer held the rapt attention of the prisoners.

Whatever modicum of peace may have existed was shattered as the earth began to shake violently. Luke is careful to point out that the earthquake was of considerable magnitude. The entire structure moved. Suddenly, the doors that held the prisoners in confinement were miraculously opened – all of the doors.

In the midst of the shock, it might not have seemed all that unbelievable that the doors swung open. Perhaps the violence of the quake disrupted the foundation and freed the doors from their hinges or dislodged them from the doorjambs. The shackles that held them in bondage falling off...that is quite another story. Something supernatural was happening. The God to whom the two missionaries were just praying and lifting praise was intervening on their behalf. Freedom had come in a most divine way!

*"When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.'"
(Acts 16:27-28)*

The jailer is jolted out of his midnight slumber by the quake. Given the debilitated condition of his prisoners, it makes sense that the guards would not be concerned about a possible escape and were, therefore, sleeping soundly. To his horror, however, when he viewed the cells, all of the doors were open. For a Roman soldier, whose highest ideals were duty and discipline, perceived failure at this level left only one possible avenue for honor – suicide. Assuming that all the prisoners had seized this unforeseen opportunity for freedom, the jailer’s utter failure would have resulted in a shame and disgrace that would have made his life void of value in his own perception.

If the jailer were to thrust himself on his own sword, the last people to stop him would have been his prisoners. The torturous misery they had experienced was his doing. The absence of hope for freedom or release was because of the chains he fastened. He was the embodiment of that from which every fiber of their being longed to be free. Logically, his captives would have been the last to intervene during his suicide.

All of this makes Paul’s cry of restoration all the more astounding. In effect, Paul’s cry for the jailer to spare himself carries with it the agreement that none of the prisoners would leave. More importantly, the prisoners would agree to continue being prisoners if he didn’t harm himself. The prisoners had absolutely ZERO reason to express any concern for the jailer – much less sacrificial love. Yet, as the tip of the jailer’s sword presses against his chest, Paul cries out for him to spare himself. Incredibly, Paul and Silas had somehow also convinced the rest of the prisoners to remain. There can be no consideration of coincidence that this display of grace occurs immediately after the recorded hymns and prayers to which the prisoners listened so attentively.

“And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”
(Acts 16:29-31)

The jailer perhaps recalled the pronouncement of the slave girl with the spirit of divination from earlier in the day saying Paul and Silas were declaring the way of salvation. Perhaps he also overheard Paul and Silas’ praying and praising. Whatever the combination of events, the jailer knew enough to know that being saved was his greatest need. What is more, based on their untimely display of thanksgiving, the passion of their singing, the intervention at his moment of greatest despair, the jailer knew that Paul and Silas knew the answers to his questions.

There was something perceptibly remarkable about Paul and Silas because of their faith in Christ. They didn’t respond to hardship with sorrow, but with thankfulness and joy. They didn’t respond to an opportunity for escape with flight, but with steadfastness and care for the man that caused them so much pain. They did not only speak for themselves, but they drew in the other prisoners because of their joyful spirits and their graceful demeanor (because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit).

We do not know how the jailer had formerly referred to Paul and Silas. However, having been accused of insurrection, the likelihood is that “Sirs” was the one thing they had not been called by the jailer.

Thankfulness is powerful in the lives of those who love God. It points those who do not know God to the reality of a greater way of life. Thankfulness that transcends our current conditions raises the awareness of those around us that there is a joy and fulfillment that is not dependent on comfort, favor, or superficial happiness. Rather, thankfulness that erupts from the souls of those that understand the depth of what Christ has already done for them transforms one’s current context, instead of being constrained to respond to one’s current context.

The Text in Life

There are, without a doubt, seasons in life when thankfulness and a heart of gratitude seem more natural than others. Having just celebrated Thanksgiving weekend in which we are inundated with images of warm dining rooms, large tables filled with seasonal favorites, and decorative cornucopias, we know that thankfulness is often portrayed as a response to plenty. In our passage for this week, however, Paul and Silas powerfully demonstrate that the thankfulness of the believer should never be confined to those seasons of plentiful blessing. Instead, the thankfulness of believers is one that transcends our current circumstances because our reason for that thankfulness also transcends our current circumstances. That being the case, here are some important things to realize about transcendent thankfulness.

First, being thankful in difficult seasons requires a nourished spirit. What I mean by that is that our ability to push past the periodic pain and difficulty of life is built before the difficult season arrives. Consider Paul and Silas singing in the midst of their torturous imprisonment. While their prayer and singing was a stark contrast to their dire environment, their dire environment was not nearly the first time they prayed to God or praised Him for His goodness. Their souls had been nourished by the Word of God, a lifestyle of prayer and worship, and intimacy with God as a result long before their imprisonment. Because their spirits had been nourished in thankfulness prior to their persecution and suffering, they were able to transcend the hardship they temporarily experienced in favor of worshiping God.

Second, resilient thankfulness is a powerful way of testifying about Jesus. One of the foundational reasons that is the case is because it reflects the character of Christ that He demonstrated in His own life. Despite the persecution and hardship of His own earthly life, Jesus was relentlessly focused on the Father. Paul and Silas demonstrate a similar focus and devotion. That transfixed attention on God transforms us and allows us demonstrate the love, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, and grace that Jesus showed to others – even those that persecuted Him. When the worshipful response to hardship is the observable character of Christ in our own lives, it speaks volumes regarding the glory of God in a life yielded to Him. In our passage, even the jailer was moved to repentance and humility.

Third, consistent thankfulness places us in a posture of humility so that we are attentive to the movement of God. Obviously, in our passage, the movement of God in the earthquake, prison doors flying open, and chains falling off would be extremely hard, if not impossible, not to notice. However, if we look at Paul's response to the intervention of God in his life in this passage, there is a noticeable calmness and lack of shock. There is an expectancy that God will move. All of this is predicated on a posture of humility — a recognition of dependence on God and His faithfulness. Essentially, that's what thankfulness is: recognizing who God is, who we are in light of who God is, and as a result, how greatly we need the God that is limitless times greater than we are. When we understand those things, thankfulness becomes a natural response in worship.

Discussion Questions

1. If you had been in the prison with Paul and Silas, listening to them sing as you sat in chains and stocks, what do you think your response would have been? How do you feel about that?
2. When was the last time you witnessed someone respond to a difficult season in his or her life with gratitude and thanksgiving? What impact did they make on you?
3. As you celebrated the Thanksgiving holiday, what were some of the things you heard family and friends say they were grateful for?
4. If thankfulness in the midst of hardship is something that requires a nourished soul, how are the elements of living your faith now nourishing your soul to transcend difficulty in the future? What elements do you think are the most important for you?
5. What about your recent history with Christ has moved you to a position of awed gratitude and humility?
6. Who in your life does God use the most powerfully to remind you of His goodness and blessing toward you? Does that person know how significant they are to you?