

Russell Kelfer

Praise From a Prison

967-A

Series: In Everything Give Thanks

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230 • (210) 226-0000 / 1-800-375-7778 • www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org

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Let's just imagine you've spent a lifetime studying football. Suppose, from the time you were six years old, you devoted your every waking moment to becoming a gridiron expert. You studied the principles, the process, and the problems of developing a winner. You know a linebacker from a nose guard; you know split ends from special teams; and you know a post route from an off-tackle slant. You may even have the statistical battle won, too. You may know who quarterbacked the Green Bay Packers in 1965, and who won the third Super Bowl, and by what score. You are what is known as a football expert.

Now suppose that the coach of the Dallas Cowboys hears about your expertise, and calls you up and invites you to Dallas for the following week's game. But when you get there, much to your surprise, instead of inviting you to be a spectator, he has invited you to be a participant in their upcoming game with the Washington Redskins. It's two o'clock on Sunday afternoon. You are suited up in a blue and white monster suit; the shoulder pads weigh more than you do, and the shoes are so heavy, the only way you can lift your legs is with a crane. Suddenly, the coach approaches you and says, "Go get 'em tiger, line up at right guard." Now mind you, you've never been on a football field before. But you know as much about football as almost anyone in that stadium. You look up in the face of the 285-pound skyscraper that is lined up opposite you. Your whole brief life passes before you.

The quarterback calls the signals; the ball is snapped. Your job is to keep the skyscraper, who resembles King Kong and the Incredible Hulk molded into one body, from laying his burly hands on the ball carrier.

As you awaken in the hospital the next morning, you are thinking, "What went wrong? Nobody knew more about football than I did. I have studied the game, learned the rules, watched it played, and even out-coached the coaches on occasions from my

comfortable position as an armchair quarterback.”

What went wrong was this: You misunderstood the difference between knowing the game, and playing the game. You got so involved in what you knew about football, you completely overlooked the fact that you had never played football. And you found out that to make it work on the battlefield is much more difficult than it is to imagine how it ought to work in the battlefield of your mind.

The Christian life is, I am afraid, much the same. There are those who know so much about Christianity that their very knowledge about it has clouded their thinking, and they have completely overlooked the fact that they're not really making it work in their own life. Doctrinal knowledge even an understanding of practical principles that are not applied, does not change us into the image of Christ. We can talk the talk, but if we never learn to walk the walk, it means nothing.

We are in our fifth lesson in a series of eight on the subject of thanksgiving. Each lesson has been accompanied by some kind of practical assignment designed to exercise the truth that we studied in that lesson in our own lives. Many of us have found that it has not been difficult to say amen or nod in agreement with the principles of praise discussed in that lesson. What has been difficult has been doing it. What has been difficult has been giving thanks in the all things of life. Some of us are like pasteboard gridiron greats, overwhelmed with statistics and armchair ideas; but on the turf, Monday through Saturday, the blocking and the tackling is very heavy. Somehow while lying dazed on the ground watching one of life's linebackers run over us, we just can't quite get the words "Praise the Lord" out of our mouths.

This, then, is the central point of our study. We are now down to making it work where we live. We are about to go out on the playing field, where the enemy is lined up against us, and from here he looks like he's in good condition. Our job (should we choose to accept it) is to praise our God all the way to the goal line. And I can promise you we will run up against some opposition along the way.

Let's begin our study in Acts 16.

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us.

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And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them.

Therefore loosing from Troas, we came with a straight course to Samothracia, and the next day to Neapolis;

And from thence to Philippi, which is the chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a colony: and we were in that city abiding certain days.

And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither.

And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.

And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us. (Acts 16:9-15)

I - THE PRELUDE TO PRAISE

On two occasions prior to this, Paul had been hindered by the Holy Spirit from going where he wanted to go. Now he believes from a vision he had, that God was calling him to go somewhere, this time to Macedonia. It would appear from verse ten, that Luke, the physician, was now a part of Paul's missionary team, and he it is that is recording both Paul's call and his conviction to answer that call. According to verse eleven, they set a straight sail; that is, they headed directly on course for their destination. (Paul would!) Now this portion of the passage is only important to this study, in that it sets the stage for where they were headed and why.

They sailed first to Samothrace, a small island, about halfway between Troas and Neapolis. The next day they headed straight for Philippi, one of the leading Macedonian cities, but by no means the largest. The city had been named after Philip, the father of Alexander the Great, and after the battle of Philippi, fought in 42 B. C., it had been made a Roman colony, with all of the privileges of Roman citizenship intact. This, too, is vital to understanding what is about to take place.

Philippi, a military outpost, had very few Jews and apparently,

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no synagogue within its gates. One mile west of the city, however, there was a river where the apostles had apparently noticed a group of women participating in an hour of prayer. Paul, and those who accompanied him (probably Timothy, Silas, and Luke), joined the women, sat down, according to verse 13, and began to share the gospel. Among those who were gathered there that day was a woman named Lydia, a seller of purple fabrics, which were in great demand in that day because of their use in official Roman garments.

Lydia, apparently a successful businesswoman in her own right, and thought by some to have been a wealthy widow, had apparently been converted to Judaism, but never had there been a day in her life like this one. This day became Lydia's spiritual birthday, for as the apostles took turns sharing, God touched this woman's heart, and she, along with the others who lived in her house, asked Christ to come into her life. Lydia immediately offered her home for Paul and his three traveling companions to spend the night. Paul at first hesitated, but Lydia "constrained them". She persuaded them to take advantage of her hospitality.

So this is the setting for the events that are about to unfold. Paul has obeyed the vision he received and gone directly to Macedonia with Timothy, Silas, and Luke; and there he has already found fertile soil for the gospel in the hearts of a group of Macedonian women, including an apparently successful businesswoman named Lydia.

Paul and his staff spent some time in Philippi, and one day as they were going to prayer, an event took place that seemed to catapult these Jewish unknowns into the Macedonian spotlight. We continue reading:

And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying:

The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation.

And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour.

(Acts 16:16-18)

So the next major experience in Paul's Macedonian stay was

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another “incident” that was no “accident” from God’s perspective. A woman who was a slave and who had a demonic spirit that demonstrated itself through witchcraft or fortune telling, began to constantly pester Paul and his Christian converts. Apparently wherever they went, she went. The words used here indicate that her fortune telling was a source of great and constant income for her masters. But for some reason, she focused her entire attention on Paul. She was obsessed with his message about Jesus.

Paul was obviously grieved in his spirit. He was, according to the passage, “worn-out” from her constant harassment. Paul commanded the demon to depart, and the Scripture says immediately the spirit left her. This, no doubt, pleased Paul, but huge dollar signs flashed in front of her masters, and those dollar signs had wings. These Jewish Christians were unwanted guests in this Roman colony, the woman’s owners surmised, and they have just used some religious hocus-pocus to pull the plug on their most profitable investment.

In anger, the men started a revolt, and the result was that Paul and Silas, before they realized what was happening, had been literally dragged to the city square, ruled to be guilty without a trial, beaten beyond measure, and thrown into a Roman dungeon.

And when her masters saw that the hope of their gains was gone, they caught Paul and Silas, and drew them into the marketplace unto the rulers,

And brought them to the magistrates, saying, These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city,

And teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans.

And the multitude rose up together against them: and the magistrates rent off their clothes, and commanded to beat them.

And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely:

Who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks.

(Acts 16:19-24)

You say, “Wow, Paul, how did you ever get into a predicament like this?” How could God’s man, following God’s leading, doing God’s ministering, end up the disgrace of the community, treated like a common criminal, and thrown into the darkest dungeon in

this Philippian jail? What a disgrace to the gospel.

Surely, Paul, you could have just prayed and avoided such a catastrophe. Surely, God doesn't want you there, does He Paul? Paul? Paul? What are you doing, Paul? Oh my, you'll never guess what Paul is doing. This guy has lost his head, or he's about to! It would seem only logical that Paul and Silas must be embarrassed and afraid. Who wouldn't be? What is foremost on their minds? Getting out, no doubt. No doubt.

II- THE PROCESS OF PRAISE

I can just picture myself and some of my friends in this situation. Here we were, "just doin' the LORD's work", on a witnessing mission that God has been blessing, and suddenly we become victims of the political system and the greed factor of some pagan businessmen. It would be like being thrown into prison for building a church building next to a tavern, and because it hurt their business, the tavern owners have you thrown into jail. My first response would have been self-righteousness. My second response would have been fear. My third response would have been anger. And I can just imagine my friends and me grumbling about the cold, the damp, and the dark in that dungeon. (We complain about the motel accommodations when we go to a seminar!)

Now, mind you, (Paul must have been thinking) this jailer is responsible for the dungeon part. The magistrates had charged him to put us somewhere where we could not escape and, rather than take a chance, he thrust us into the inner dungeon, a place normally reserved for those whose crimes were of much greater magnitude, and just to be sure, our lovely friend has made our feet fast in stocks. Unless you have seen some of the ancient stocks used in Roman prisons, you can't appreciate what that meant. In some cases, it was just a bar of wood to which both feet were chained. In many cases, however, it consisted of a frame of wood in which the two feet, separated far apart, were stretched and fastened. Still other stocks had five holes for fastening the feet, hands and head. None of the three were comfortable, and this added burden could also be charged to this somewhat paranoid jailer who, in defense of his job, was treating Paul and Silas with the same kind of mercy he would show someone who had tried to murder the Emperor.

So here's Paul and Silas, their feet fastened to a wooden bar

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by chains, possibly their hands and head as well, thrust into an inner dungeon with no light, no heat, and no help. And all because they were faithful in doing the will of God. We've already decided what we would have been doing; let's see what they were doing.

And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them.

(Acts 16:25)

Sounds like these two guys knew how to make it work in real life. They did the assignments. This was second nature to them. Bound by chains in a dungeon for a crime they did not commit, we read that “at midnight, Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God” These men had been beaten severely. Their feet, and maybe their hands, were pressed into metal clasps and possibly stretched until they could not move without pain. They were in utter darkness; most Roman dungeons had no windows at all. The stench as well as the oppressiveness of darkness must have added to the uncertainty. If they could be thrust into this kind of confinement with no trial and no defense, tomorrow could well hold for them a mock trial and either more beatings or even death. But about midnight, or sometime late in the night, after having suffered already a great deal, Paul and Silas decided to have a praise gathering in the dungeon of that Philippian jail.

It says “they prayed and sang praises unto God”. The phrase means they were actually interspersing praying and praising, probably using portions of the Psalms to sing songs of gratitude to their loving God who cared enough for them to allow them the honor of being imprisoned for Him. The next phrase is vital. “And the prisoners heard them.”

In the surrounding cells, all kinds of criminals, being held for all kinds of crimes, were awakened from their restless sleep by the strangest sounds—sounds of joy. In the dungeon, of all places, two grown men were singing! And they were not chanting songs of grief; they were not mourning; they were praising their God. They were giving thanks! That's what will almost always happen when you learn to praise God from life's prisons. Those who are prisoners in similar straits will hear you or see you and wonder, how can you be joyful at a time like this?

Someone else heard Paul and Silas that night; someone whose loving ear had never stopped listening to their every heartbeat. Someone whose eyes had never stopped watching their every

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flinch of pain. Someone whose hands had never stopped waiting, eagerly waiting for the proper moment to deliver them when that deliverance would bring maximum glory to His name. God was listening, beloved. His ear was not heavy that it could not hear; neither was His hand shortened that He could not save.¹ God was listening and God was pleased. Those melodies of praise reached the ears of their loving God and brought joy upon joy to His precious heart. God was listening. God heard. God was pleased. And God acted.

And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed.

(Acts 16:26)

III- THE PROGRESSION OF PRAISE

Oh, Beloved, there is never a prison experience that God cannot deliver you from. The question is always, "Is it best and is it time?" When the answer is "yes" to both of those questions, Satan and all his demonic host are paralyzed. They are helpless. When God decides to deliver His children, the gates of hell cannot prevail against them. When God decides to glorify His name through loosing the chains that bind His loved ones, nothing so fragile as metal bars or concrete pillars or wooden slabs will bother Him. Like toothpicks, they will snap at the very breath of His voice. Those seemingly impenetrable rocks will melt into rivers of nothingness at His Word. Trees will bend like sticks of straw. Mountains will move as though they were on ball bearings. Buildings will topple; empires will crumble; battlefields will instantly be silenced by the touch of His hand.

When God acts, neither the wiles of Satan nor the might of man means a thing. When God acts, there is no force on earth or in hell that can stop Him. *He is!* And thus, when *He does*, the earth and all that is in it, bows to His Word in humble submission. God was pleased with the praise of His saints. And He had allowed this very imprisonment to place them where they would have a choice, and where, should they choose to praise Him, their voices would ring into the hearts of those who had ears to hear. God was pleased and God acted. He acted *powerfully*. The whole earth shook. He acted *personally*. Each of their chains was individually loosed; each of the doors to that prison was individually opened.

¹ Isaiah 59:1

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Now you say, “Run, Paul; run, Silas; run for your lives. This is your chance. Get out while you have the chance. This is your objective, isn’t it Paul? To be set free? Run, Paul, run.” Guess what? Paul doesn’t run. Paul and Silas stand totally still and wait. God somehow calmed their spirits and let them know that He had a much greater purpose in mind than just setting them free; He had some hearts in bondage to sin that He wanted to set free. And only if they stayed around to share their faith would it happen. Who was it God was after? He was after the heart of the very man who had caused so much of their pain. He often is. Let’s read on.

And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled.

But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here.

Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas,

And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. (Acts 16:27-31)

Now we see why Paul and Silas were thrown into prison. Remember? Satan meant it for evil. God allowed it for good.² God let Satan get by with taunting Paul through a demon-possessed fortune teller; let the crowds get by with dragging him through the streets in utter humiliation; let the magistrates get by with mocking justice, condemning them with neither testimony nor trial; and He let the jailer get by with thrusting them into the inner dungeon and fastening their feet in stocks, just to protect his job. Satan thought he was having a field day at God’s expense. But, Beloved, he never does. God said, “Okay, you can have Paul and Silas for a day or so. You can beat them, mock them, humiliate them, and imprison them. Go ahead. I have a Philippian jailer who needs to be born again. This is the perfect plan to do it.”

Satan meant it for evil; God meant it for good.³ What Satan hadn’t counted on, was that once he had these men beaten, bruised, and chained, they would respond with anthems of

² Genesis 50:20

³ Genesis 50:20

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praise. He hadn't counted on that. And like a key turnover in the midst of a close football game that changes the momentum and turns the game into a rout for the team that appeared to be losing, so that midnight sing-song and prayer meeting in that Macedonian jail turned what appeared to be certain defeat into a glorious triumph. It was a triumph of such magnitude that from the grandstands of heaven, the multitudes of the angelic host broke out into anthems of praise as a Philippian jailer and his entire family walked together into the sunlight of eternity and became a part of the family of God. That was worth beatings; that was worth chains; that was worth dungeons. And that was what happened when two men learned how to praise in a prison.

The postscript to the story is found in the next six verses. Capsulized, it went like this: The next morning the magistrates arrived at their appointed duty stations, apparently heard about the inexplicable tremors the night before, and ordered their aides, the same guys who had beaten Paul and Silas so unmercifully, to go down to the city jail and let the "criminals" go, provided they left town on the double. By now, Paul had baptized the jailer and his entire family, and he was at the jailhouse waiting for his one way ticket out of town. When they arrived, however, Paul refused to go.

It was at this time that Paul informed the officials that these two guys they had beaten without cause, condemned without trial, and imprisoned without justice were Roman citizens. "Tell you what," Paul responds, "You tell them to come get me if you want me to leave". In other words, Paul was not going to exit as a common criminal, when every right he had as a Roman citizen had been trodden underfoot. So the officials came and begged Paul to leave peacefully, for they were afraid (as well they should have been), and Paul and Silas went back to Lydia's house, had a time of praise and encouragement, and departed.

IV- LEARNING TO PRAISE FROM LIFE'S PRISONS

You say, "Well, that's an incredible story. Yes, that Paul was indeed a remarkable man. I sure am glad that God hasn't seen fit to test me that way." I think he has. I think that each of us, in varying degrees, has been thrown into the prisons of life by Satan with the sole intent of causing us to become angry at God and discouraged with life. God, on the other hand, allowed it, because He wanted to see if, in the midst of it all, we had learned the

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secret of how to be filled with praise in the midst of life's prisons.

That is what I meant by the opening illustration. There is a difference between sitting in class and discussing the miracles of giving thanks and the reality of actually being in the prison houses of life and being thankful. Some of us are experts in creative theology, discovering new ways to outline principles and illustrate concepts about how to live the Christian life. Then when we find ourselves locked in the dungeons of life's difficulties, we revert to the mumbling, murmuring, complaining saints we've always been. We can see how Paul made it work, and we marvel. But trapped behind the prison bars of life, we tend to find the "in everything give thanks" message a bit too impractical and theological for us. From this point on in this study, we want to put a stop to that. We want to make it work on a day-to-day basis. The last lesson was designed to teach us how to once and for all learn to praise God for all that has ever happened to us in the past, thus freeing us to face life with praise in the present. This lesson goes a step beyond. It is designed to teach us how to meet the prison experiences of life as they occur, and without hesitation, to begin to praise.

Let's begin by acknowledging that God understands that what may seem like a prison experience to one person might be considered a routine daily happening for someone else. The key is that God knows your heart, and He knows the level of what it takes for you to be imprisoned by circumstances. But one thing is for sure: whatever the prison experiences of your life may be, God considers them to be reasons to praise.

Very quickly then, let's examine life's prisons and ask ourselves what they are; what we are to do; when we are to do it; why we are to do it; how we are to do it; and finally remind ourselves for what it is that we are to be thankful about. It's a tough order tackle in a short time, but that is why we are here.

A- What are life's prisons?

First of all, let's define the word "prison".

A prison: a place of confinement where one is denied the freedoms afforded to others.

That's a pretty accurate statement about what prisons are and what they do. If that be true and if we are to especially learn to praise God in life's prisons, then what are they? If a prison is a place where you are confined but others are set free, then there

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are many situations that might well be “prisons” to you. Let’s look quickly at two kinds of prisons: those in which you are placed for long-term incarceration and those in which you are placed for short terms, either before you come to trial, or until you are released.

Long-term prison experiences for most of us are those experiences that appear to have no immediate relief. It seems to be a life sentence. There seems to be no promise of an early parole.

Incurable illnesses are long-term prison experiences. Except for a special act of mercy, you seem to be trapped in a dungeon with no light, no relief, and no hope. There seems to be nothing to do. Paul says, “You can praise God from that prison.” And as you are praising Him, others, locked in cell blocks of agony nearby, will hear you and see you and want to know just what it is you have to be thankful for. Will not one conversion because of your praise give a meaning to your affliction beyond human understanding?

A seemingly endless bad marriage may be a prison experience for you. Each day seems to bring new grief and resurrect old hurts. Promises unfulfilled only deepen the hurts and prolong the agony. The world says, “flee”. God says, “stand”. What’s a person to do? It’s like being locked in a dungeon, with no way of escape. Paul says, “You can praise God from that prison.” And amidst your praise, not only will others catch a glimpse of joy beyond understanding, your spirit will begin to soar, and there will be meaning to your patient waiting.

Financial bondage that goes on and on may be a prison experience for you. Perhaps the harder you try, the deeper the debt seems to go. You try all the “formulas” and every time you think you’ve made progress, there comes a setback. What can you do? Paul says, “Praise God from that prison,” and as you do, the reality of the importance of your eternal investments, which are accruing great dividends even now, will begin to give you the grace to be faithful with the things that are perishing.

That thorn in your life may be a prison to you. It may be a physical affliction that will not destroy your body but threatens to destroy your spirit. On and on and on it goes. Each new day brings no relief, and as you face the prospect of the pain never ending, you may feel as though you are locked in a prison, with

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no way of escape. What is there to do? Paul says, “Praise God from that prison,” and as you do, the grace God pours into your life will reveal anew the strength that God can only supply through weakness, and once again, it is worth it.

What may be called “terminal loneliness” may be your prison experience. Year after year without a mate. Year after year without a friend. Year after year without someone to lean on, someone to trust in, someone to share with.

You feel trapped behind prison bars that separate you from the closeness others have with one another; and there seems to be no way of escape. Paul says, “Praise God from that prison,” and as you do, you will begin to see the heavens open, and you will come to know the Friend of friends as never you have known Him before.

Those are just a few of life’s long-term prison sentences. Then there are those sudden arrests that come upon you unexpectedly and then pass on as quickly as they came. You are driving to work, and with no warning, a car pulls in front of you. You pick up the phone to call home, only to hear of a trauma you never thought could happen to you. You go to work, only to find that not only did you not get that promotion, but you have been, in a sense, demoted to a lower position. These things will pass, or solutions will be found, but for the moment, you are seemingly imprisoned by circumstances, with no way out. Paul says, “Praise God from that prison.” He has a purpose; He has a plan; He has allowed that test to test your response. What does He desire? He desires praise.

Those are some of life’s “prison experiences”. Some of them come upon you unexpectedly and leave just as quickly. Others come and seem to stay for an endless eternity. The prescription is the same. They are pedestals for praise; they are platforms for praise; they are the curtains that life pulls back to reveal the real you in the midst of the real battles of the real Christian life. They are the 285-pound linemen that is staring you in the face, when all you had planned to do was be a spectator in a game in which others were being hurt. Now suddenly, you’re on the first string, and you either have to make it work or else.

Those are the circumstances we call “life’s prisons”. You may be in one right now, and the darkness and the dampness and loneliness and the endlessness may be more than you can bear.

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God has a request to make of you. He wants you to learn how to praise from that prison. He has others in life's cells around you who are listening at midnight to hear what you are saying, to see what you are doing. You are in that prison so God can have a teaching tool to demonstrate to them what real freedom really is.

B- When should you begin praising?

The second question is at what stage of life's "prison experiences" does the process of praise begin? The answer is: *immediately!* If you wait until the heat of the battle is intense, two things will have happened: 1) you will have allowed your mind to become discouraged, having listened to the voice of the enemy, and 2) you will have missed opportunities to demonstrate to those who are watching how God behaves in life's prisons. II Chronicles 20:22a is your key verse:

And when they began to sing and to praise, [then] the LORD set ambushments... [around the enemy],

Paul didn't have a praise meeting after the third week of his incarceration. Nor did he get a good night's sleep deciding to pray and praise at his quiet time the next morning. At midnight Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises to the Lord. The very moment the incident occurs, or the heaviness of it descends upon you, begin a day of thanksgiving. Immediately, if not sooner. Had Eve done that instead of listening to the intruder's arguments, what a difference it would have made in her life and in ours.

C- Why should you praise?

You ask why? Simply because God told you to. You say, that makes no sense to the natural mind. Good. That simply reinforces the truth. The natural mind can never understand the things of the Spirit, for they are spiritually discerned. Ephesians 5 tells you why. Paul begins by saying,

See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise [men],

Redeeming the time [using it as it was divinely intended before the fall in spite of the fact that the days we live in] because the days are evil.

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess [which is debauchery]; but [rather in opposition to] drunkenness, be [become] filled with the Spirit; (Ephesians 5:15,16,18)

Then he adds here's how a Spirit-filled Christian will behave,

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Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;

Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;

Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.

(Ephesians 5:19-21)

Then the book of Ephesians goes on to describe how wives, husbands, and children are to express their lives as Spirit-controlled believers. But the real issue here is that if you want to do the will of God in a given situation, you do not turn to the artificial spirits of this world. You rather, instantly, instinctively, begin to sing psalms and hymns in your heart, praising God in your spirit, and, by an act of your will, immediately give thanks in every situation in the name of Jesus Christ. In everything you are to give thanks. Don't try to understand it...do it.

D- How should you praise?

You ask, but how? We just heard how. The moment you realize you are being cast into life's prisons, you begin to sing the Word, or songs about the Word, or you meditate on Scripture, or you pray Scripture back to God. This is vital. Praise Him with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, giving thanks always for all things. Here's a good verse to claim:

In God I will praise his word, in God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do unto me. (Psalm 56:4)

In every praise gathering I can find in the Scripture, the ones doing the praising are taking the Word of God and singing it or praising it back to God. You say, "Well, what do I say to God in the prisons of life?" You sing Psalm 146 or Psalm 147 or Psalm 149 or Psalm 118 or II Samuel 22 or any one of thousands of praise passages in the Bible.

But first you must memorize them. You must meditate on them, so that when trial strikes, your natural response is for the praise of the Word to flow from your heart to the Father. The whole key to the entire concept of praise is your laying the praise passages of the Bible on your heart beforehand so that the Spirit has a hymnal of thanksgiving engraved on your heart to use as He leads you in your hour of praise. The Word of God is the Song of God that the Heart of God wants from the Child of God in his hour of need. Praise Him through the Word. It will remove all of

your questions about how to pray in a crisis.

E- What should you praise Him for?

Then of course, we ask “Praise Him for what?” Well, in the first place, the Scripture will take care of that. Second, we have already dealt with that prior to this lesson. You will find, as you praise Him through His own words, that you will be praising Him “Just Because He Is!” Your praise will be for His character, for Calvary, and for those expressions of His character that have demonstrated His life to you.

You know what will happen? You will awaken to realize that you are no longer a spectator in the grandstands wishing you could make it work. You will be a participant in the battle against the enemy, and the greater the opposition, the greater will be the praise. And Beloved, Satan cannot stand that. You use the Word every time he casts you into the prisons of life. If you use it simply to praise the name of the Living God, and the enemy will flee from you, for you will have drawn nigh unto God. You will have resisted the devil.

The key is that the very moment you sense the circumstances of life beginning to surround you, and you feel accused, beaten, dragged into life’s dungeons, placed in the stocks, so to speak, so that you cannot move, do not even for one second listen to the enemy’s voice. Immediately break forth into praise. Make melody in your heart to the Lord. Sing back to Him His own precious words of praise. Lift your heart in adoration and thanksgiving, not for the circumstances, but just for who He is.

You, too, may experience an earthquake in your spirit. You, too, may see the doors of your circumstances swing open, and you too may immediately be set free. You may not. Instead, the still, small voice of the Spirit may simply speak to you, quiet you, comfort you, and strengthen you. Remember the reason for your praise is not so that you can assure yourself of your release from that prison. Paul didn’t leave when he got the chance. (Not until God was finished with him in that prison.) The object of your praise isn’t your release. The object of your praise is God’s glory. When He has been glorified to the maximum, the changing of your circumstances will be no problem to Him. That may not come in this life. It may. Remember, Beloved, if He decides to move on your behalf, nothing in this world can stop Him. If, as a result of your praise, He decides to set you free, the mountains

Praise From a Prison

will shake; the trees will bow down; the heavens will open; and He will loose from you those chains that so chafe and bind and cause you grief. But if, by your remaining in those bonds, a jailer or a fellow prisoner might go free, and I mean free indeed, which would you rather have?

Learn to praise in life's prisons. Learn to sing God's sweet words back into His heart, as soon as you hear the doors of the prison begin to shut. And keep on praising Him, Beloved, until you walk, all shackles removed, into the perfect freedom of His waiting arms on that beautiful day when you hear Him say: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant...enter thou into the joy of the Lord".⁴ You will be ready to meet Him, Beloved, and you will be prepared for an eternity of praising Him, for you will have spent your life praising Him. And it all will have begun the day you learned to praise in a prison.

⁴ Matthew 25:21

Jail House Rock

A Challenge to Additional Study and Application

(Developing a Life of Praise)

1- Using only the Scriptures, begin developing a notebook of praise passages.

2- Group the verses into sections: those praising God for who He is (mercy, grace, love, etc.); those praising God for what He's done; and those praising God for Calvary.

3- Begin a systematic program of Scripture memory, using nothing but praise passages.

4- Practice asking God in your time alone with Him to bring those verses to your mind *whenever one of life's prison situations enters your life.*

5- When you feel tested, *immediately* say "It is written" and begin praising God, using those verses.

6- Ask God specifically to place you in life's prison houses where others can see the grace at work, and you can,

be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:
(1 Peter 3:15b)

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10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230
210-226-0000 or 1-800-375-7778

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