

Apostolic Foundations - Part 8

by Art Katz

Art Katz emphasizes the church's critical role in recognizing and confronting spiritual powers that influence society.

Duration: 55:48

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Acts 16:9-18

Topics: "Apostolic"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding the powers and principalities that exist in the world, particularly in America. He refers to an episode in the book of Acts where Paul and Silas encounter these powers in Philippi. The speaker highlights how the crowd, who should have been uplifted by Paul and Silas, instead attacks them due to their own victimhood and manipulation by the powers. He also discusses the detrimental effects of propaganda and the erosion of discernment and truth in society. The speaker encourages the church to confront these powers and advocate for the importance of truth and human dignity.

Transcript

From time to time I'm going to mention a book that I want to encourage you to acquire. I mentioned one last week, and these two are of the same quality and caliber, and yet little known by God's people. One is by Jim Wallace, W-A-L-I-S.

I hope we're getting this on the tape. And it's called, Agenda for a Biblical People, published by Hopper and Brothers. I just don't have words enough to describe the depth, the significance of this book, the grasp that this young brother has for the kingdom of God, the church, the issues that are before us, including the one that we're discussing in these days.

Another one by William Stringfellow, who has now gone on with the Lord, a long struggle with cancer. He was a lawyer in Harlem and undertook on behalf of the poor and the downtrodden and gained tremendous insight in what goes on in society with regard to the powers. And the book is called, An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land.

It's a very long title, but it is absolutely superb. It's chiseled. Every word is monumental.

He's a lawyer theologian, and it's just an astonishing statement of which most theologians know nothing. So these two books and the one that I recommended last week would be such a substantial contribution to the foundations of your faith. And as Lord gives me grace tonight, I'll try to intersperse some select quotations into the text.

And I want, I think by the encouragement of God, to try something new tonight. And I've been struggling with the issue of quoting. I know that quoting from texts like these can be difficult for the hearers.

The reader is familiar with that material, and he understands what he's saying. But for those who have not read it and are hearing it, they can't quite lay hold the first time. And yet these quotations are so cogent and penetrating that it would be a pity to omit the material altogether.

So I'm just looking to the Lord how to present this tonight. And I believe that he wants me to use a text in Acts 16, if you'll turn to it. And then try strategically to fit in some of these very powerful quotations as they are significant to the text.

So we're talking about the principalities and powers of the air for those of you who were not here last week. And I want to read a statement immediately from William Stringfellow's book. Because I mentioned how little understanding there is on the part of the church in this enormous subject that was so well known, so familiar to the early church.

In fact, the profoundest aspect of the atonement of Christ was not so much with the issue of sin as it was deliverance from the powers, that he made an open spoil of the enemy. It was for the early church one of the most significant aspects of the atonement of Christ. And yet this is least known by the modern church today.

Because the principalities and powers, this invisible spirit realm that occupies a heavenly place over the earth seems a little far-fetched. It's a little out of keeping with the temper of our own rationalistic and scientific civilization. And so even eminent theologians have poo-pooed these references in scripture, though they're there.

We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world's darkness. And they attribute that to some kind of vestigial hangover, some Judaistic remnant from Paul out of his rabbinical upbringing. But not any true reference to an authentic dimension that needs to be recognized by the church.

It's more or less a mythological language that does not refer to actuality. And if the church goes on with that kind of understanding, it's doomed before it begins. So here's what Stringfellow says, Americans, including professed Christians, who have biblical grounds to be wiser, remain, it seems, astonishingly obtuse about these powers.

They seldom impute to them personality or integrity as creatures, and commonly deem institutions and similar principalities as subject to human sponsorship, patronage, and control. Like government, like culture, like sport, like rock music. We think of it only in human, cultural terms, and don't recognize that behind them are these powerful forces acting upon men.

But the animus, the animation, the source, is in the heavenlies. Yet to be ignorant or gullible or naive about the demons, to underestimate the inherent capacities of the principalities, to fail to notice the autonomy of these powers as creatures, abets their usurpation of human life and their domination of

human beings. They want nothing more than to remain unknown, than to be looked upon as mythological, to be ignored as some kind of ancient reference that doesn't have any present validity, because in that way they can continue to operate and increasingly bring men and societies and nations under their domination.

As I mentioned last week, we have had recent opportunity in history to see entire nations come under the domination of these powers, Nazi Germany being a powerful case in point, and we can say the same for the USSR. These nations that are bound by powerful ideologies, that dehumanize even their own citizens, that are ruthless in the employment of force, all of these are characteristic signs of a nation manipulated and jerked, operated by the powers, through the gullible and unwitting acquiescence of people who just don't know better. Because there's only one agency in the earth that does know better, or should know better, namely the church.

And if it remains in a posture of ignorance or indifference, and does not make known the victory won at the cross, then nations and societies are required to be the continuing victims of these powers. Any social concern of human beings which neglects or refuses to deal with the principalities with due regard to their authentic identity, I'm paraphrasing because you might get tripped on his language, is delusive. While any social change or any evangelism, now I'm adding, any program of the church predicated upon mere human action, while prompted by a so-called social gospel or motivated by some pietism, is doomed.

In other words, any activity of the church, whether evangelistic or social or any program, that does not take into full cognizance the reality of these powers of the air, is doomed in the accomplishment of the thing that it intends. It just is making mock motions that accomplish nothing. In short, to behold America biblically requires comprehension of the powers and principalities as they appear and as they abound in the world, even, alas, in America, in this country.

So I want to show from an early episode in the book of Acts, the 16th chapter, something of the evidence of these powers as Paul and Silas were confronted by them in the course of their journey. To save time and not to begin with the earlier part of the text, we know that Paul was successful in promulgating the gospel in Asia and then he was stopped by the Holy Spirit from continuing and he sought to go to another location and the Spirit prevented him and then a vision came in the night of a Macedonian beseeching him, and so when the vision came to Paul, they assuredly gathered, it says in the King James, that the Lord had called them and therefore they set forth with a straight course and they came to Philippi, one of the principal cities of Greece, and it was the first account, the first instance of the gospel being brought to Europe from Asia. First time that the gospel came into what is the western world and then subsequently to ourselves.

So it's interesting to see what was their experience in the bringing of the gospel to the west. In verse 11, therefore, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace and the following day to Neapolis and from there to Philippi, which is the leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in the city some days and on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside where we supposed there was a place of prayer and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul and when she was baptized with her household, she besought us saying, if you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord,

come to my house and stay, and she prevailed upon us. It hurts me to have to even rush by these verses, all of which deserves enormous acknowledgement and commentary.

And I've got to just say this much, the Lord opened her understanding as Paul spoke and when she was baptized, no ifs, no ands, no buts, she heard the word and immediately made the most radical commitment to God in a place and in a culture where baptism would be so offensive and such a source of rebuke upon people in a pagan or even a Judaistic culture. But she did not hesitate for that act of obedience and even besought them to come stay with her. Subsequently they will go, but the stigma of having received apostolic men will remain with her and she's willing to bear it.

And another thing to note that the gospel begins with a woman. It began with women at a riverside. It began with a woman hearing, believing, and entering.

So this is again a continuation of a whole pattern that God shows us in the scriptures that almost invariably the inception of God's profoundest works begin with women. And carrying on from verse 16, As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying. She followed Paul and us crying, These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation.

And this she did for many days. But Paul was annoyed and turned and said to the spirit, I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And it came out of her that very hour.

If I had something to do with the translation, I don't think I would use the word annoyed. That sounds like he was petulant or piqued. It bothered him.

He was being disturbed. The better word is he was grieved. He was stricken in his spirit to see a woman being used as merchandise by men who were employing her because she was under the influence of demon spirits and had a spirit of divination which brought her masters much gain.

And I just am asking you to sense in this little episode the universal import that what we have here is a slice of something, a reality, a statement of the influence of the powers in society that continues to this very day. Of victims who are jerked and manipulated by a spirit realm that has something to do with profit, with advantage to men, which is fiercely contended for, as we're going to see in a minute, the consequence that falls on Paul and Silas for this single act of deliverance. It wasn't just, well, there was a woman who was distracting them and to get rid of her they took authority over the spirit.

In being grieved by her bound condition and her exploitation by men through the powers of the air, they effected a deliverance, but in doing so they touched something at the very heart and the wellspring of civilization itself that is under the dominion and rule of the principalities and the powers of the air. That has to do with profit, self-aggrandizement, self-seeking, exploitation, misuse, abuse. And the reason that we miss this is that we think that the only one who needs deliverance is someone who is foaming at the mouth or someone with jerks or spasms or some blatant form of demonism and don't recognize that there are entire societies that are under demonic rule and influence that don't even know of their condition, that are being employed by IBM or 3M or corporations or sports organizations or forms of culture that are manipulating and dominating and sucking the very life out of them in an exploitive way, and we haven't so much as taken notice because it is so normative in our society.

And yet it's characteristic of the powers to rob mankind of its humanity, to mar the image of God in man by exploiting, by brutalizing, by taking advantage, by dominating, by jerking by strings, by playing on fear, on manipulation, hope of profit or whatever motive. In a word, what I'm asking us is to begin to take on an apostolic seeing of entire societies and civilizations under the dominion and influence of the powers of the air that have had so long an unfettered sway and unchallenged dominance that we take the culture under their influence to be normative, that is robbing the life of millions. And we ourselves subscribe to it and to a certain degree are even under that influence also.

And to the degree that we are, we are voiceless and powerless and without authority to stand against these powers so as to deliver those who are their victims. Because we ourselves are being jerked and being manipulated. I don't know if I mentioned last week, I gave a few examples of how the Lord has been bringing this subject to my attention.

Did I mention how in East Germany on a last night of ministry on the back of an envelope with a flow pen the Lord was inspiring certain statements and there were downstairs six elders from the church in this city in East Germany waiting for a final word from me and when I brought that word these men went pale in their faces and began to tremble. And the word was this, that something was moving in my spirit that causes me grief that I've been moving through a nation as one East German brother said our nation is a nation of schizophrenics and alcoholics. The man in whose house I was staying worked in an automobile factory and he says half of the employees are crooked all the time.

Alcoholism is the most prevalent social problem in communist Marxist nations. Why? They're without hope because they're being exploited because the kinds of things which God constituted men to live is not available to them and not the least of these things is truth. And in East Germany they're living in a lie and the signs are everywhere.

It's ubiquitous. Sorry about that. That means present everywhere.

You see it when you get off the train stations. You see it in front of factories. You see it in social halls.

Signs. 45 years of Soviet German friendship. It's a piece of malarkey.

It's just a piece of communist propaganda. There's no friendship at all with Russians. Those poor Russian soldiers, I've seen them in the streets.

They're like dogs. They can't even get the time of day. But for the purposes of propaganda, for the Marxist objectives, these kinds of signs are seen everywhere.

An alternative to being confirmed is to making a vow to the state. And if you'll pick up a paper on Sunday in East Germany, you'll see statement after statement where they buy these ads and the young kids who have made these covenants with the state make their statements. There's something so patently false.

Something so rotten. Something so against anything that can be understood as integrity. Something so brainwashed, so formed, so manipulated.

An entire generation being fitted to the purposes of a state without any regard to its humanity that it chills you. And so what the Lord had me to say to these men is there's only one agency in earth that can stand for what is made in God's image. Namely, the church.

That we need to be jealous for and protect and stand for the image of God in men. And when we see an entire nation becoming schizophrenic and freaking out or alcoholic, we need to confront the powers that are using propaganda and the lie to rob them of their integrity and the sense of truth. And to tell them that if you continue like this, you may succeed in your political and economic goals, but you're going to have a nation of robots and automatons that have been robbed of their humanity.

How do you like to go and tell the communist officials that as the church, you are authorized and have a responsibility to bring this to their attention? They need to regard the issue of truth. That there's something more important than the expediency of propaganda. Namely, human personality that requires truth in order to be formed in the image of God.

And I said to these men, this is not just a guise by which you're going to witness to them or hope for the salvation or the conversion of these authorities. If it comes, great. And you're not even to go in the hope that they're actually going to act on the statement that you make.

That would be tremendous. Whether they act on it or not, whether they throw you in the clink or not, whether you're never seen from again or not, you have an obligation to stand for truth. And that's what Paul did.

He could not stand to see the image of God marred in this demoniacal victim being exploited by men to bring them much gain and commanded the demons to come out of her in that very hour. Now it's instructive to see what was the consequence of Paul's act. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, when their false hope was demolished, when the lie by which they were operating and by which so much of society operates in the hope of gain, which is a false premise.

It's not one which God gives men for their life in earth. And yet the profit motive and the object of gain is so unchallenged and so accepted as normative that we don't recognize the source and the inspiration of that false hope. Remember what Paul said on Mars Hill? That God has made of all men from one blood and established the bounds of their habitation.

If happily they might make much gain, if happily they might make much profit. He said if happily they might be found of God for he is near to every one of us. And Paul was saying this is the true purpose for our human existence.

To be found of him to establish a relationship that will be enduring and eternal while we yet have breath in this earth. So the hope of gain is a false hope. But if the church does not identify it as false, it allows people to run after and to be motivated by something contrary to God's intention.

And therefore to have their whole life marred and warped and made perverse. Are you following me? I'm talking about demon spirits in a context that we don't ordinarily consider. We have been so habituated to think in terms of deliverance of an individual person who is evidently under the influence of demons and to consider that deliverance.

I want to say respectfully that's kid stuff. That's only peripheral. That's majoring in the minors.

In fact we wouldn't even need to do that if we really struck at the foundational thing that is going on which needs to be recognized and can only be recognized by a church that has the discernment and equally the authority to stand against these powers and to reveal them as false and their premises as false and to deliver the victims from those false motives and misspent living. You understand why I prayed tonight?

Lord, be merciful. Lord, give us grace.

My God, to understand this. So though Paul here is only dealing with an individual victim, what's being revealed is a slice of something that affects entire generations, affects entire societies and entire civilizations living under a false hope of gain. False premises, false assumptions, lying spirits that have become normative in civilization because they have not been challenged by the only agency that has the qualification to challenge and to reveal the false thing by the truth, namely the church who is not being jerked by those false values and not only proclaims the truth but is the living evidence of a people who are moving by another beat, by another set of values and another alternative.

Got the picture? No wonder we'd rather run to perform an individual deliverance because we can perform an individual deliverance without so much as any alteration of our lifestyle. But to tackle the powers of the air and the principalities and rulers of this world's darkness that has affected entire societies, nations and civilizations is not so light a thing. That's going to require a radical alteration of our own mode of life, not the least aspect of which is a tremendous capacity for givingness and for sacrifice because we'll even make ourselves poor to help others like the church in Zaire because we're not ruled by fear, because we don't think that the issue of our income and making it to the end of the month is based on just an arithmetical calculation of what we're getting from our employers and what we can afford because we know that we're moving and living and having our being in another dimension altogether that is not determined by an employer but by God.

But when the powers look down upon us and see us in our miserliness handing out the traditional Lutheran dollar in the collection plate and playing it safe and seeing to our own future and security and unwilling to take the risks of faith that would beggar us and show that our confidence is in God, that we believe the word that liberates, that says, give and it shall be given unto you. When they see our trembling and see our miserliness they're not at all impressed when we make reference to give and it shall be given unto you. They're not at all impressed when we invoke a scripture.

They know what is the actual condition of our heart and life because our lifestyle betrays and reveals it. Paul they know and Jesus they know but they don't know us in the sense that we in any way constitute a threat to their dominion over men. Once you begin to challenge the unspoken premises and the assumptions by which the powers have dominated over societies and nations here's going to be a little taste of the kind of thing that we will provoke against ourselves.

No wonder that these East German elders went pale. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates they said these men are Jews and they're disturbing our city.

They advocate customs which is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice so sanctimonious. 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 charging the jailer to keep them safely who having received this charge put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. A marginal note here in my bible says the stocks were not only a device by which men were restrained they were a device by which men were tortured.

Just look at all of the verbs used here that are violent, vicious, vehement. They drag, they seize them, they drag them the crowd joined in attacking them they tore the garments off them they gave orders to beat them with rods they inflicted many blows upon them they threw them into jail they cast them into the inner

dungeon they fastened their feet in the stocks. You know what you have to say? This is an untoward response this is a response out of proportion to the offense which is exactly the issue of what is happening to believers who are tonight in dungeons and prisons and concentration camps in iron curtain countries.

The viciousness, and even in Latin America where the saints come into the hands of these revolutionary groups it's not just an issue of murder it's an issue of torture it's an issue of fiendish violence there's a vehemence, there's a vile kind of thing that wells up that seems to be the pattern everywhere as it was with Paul and Silas that is out of proportion to the offense of the deliverance of a single woman and we need to understand why because something was being touched here that was at the heart of a whole mode of existence the powers were outraged that anyone dared break their monopoly dared to reveal their domination over men dared to free a victim that had come under their authority because once a victim is freed in the power of Jesus once a demonstration has been given that these powers can be resisted and that the victims can be released what will be the next?

Such a society cannot tolerate such a possibility they have to keep the most severe clamp down on a church that threatens them with another kind of loyalty, another kind of worship another kind of authority, another kind of power so long as the church is emasculated so long as it's willing to play patsy so long as it's satisfied with mere Sunday services as unhappily the East German church is only too happy to do there'll never be a vicious response like this but once the church begins to act apostolically once it begins to discern the bondage under which the people abound once it begins to deliver by the authority which is theirs corporately and raise questions about the unspoken premises by which the whole civilization is falsely living then you can expect, wham! a tremendous blow

coming down with vehemence against those who dare to unveil the enemy and show him out that's exactly what happened to Jesus but the remarkable thing is the more furious the response of the powers and the powers only know one kind of wisdom threat, fear, intimidation they know that mankind can be jerked because of its fear of its bodily well-being we're afraid to suffer and we're afraid to die and therefore whole civilizations will fall into line just at the threat of in any way being affected in our body or our life isn't it remarkable that it's an enemy that has been disarmed and made an open spoil and is yet still able to manipulate entire nations as I spoke last week about Italy with the influence of the mafia because though they are without true power they are an influence using

threat and intimidation because people are so alive to the condition of their own bodies and so fearful of injury, suffering or death therefore there's only one people again who can show these powers out for the bluff that they are can confront them exactly on this ground namely a church that is not afraid to suffer not afraid to die not afraid O ye of little faith why are you afraid? when you think of faith in this context as against the way we've been hearing it up to now in terms of believing for a Cadillac we're on an entirely different ground we need to measure our faith not by the material things for which we ourselves hanker but in terms of the kind of fears that are still operative in our lives so let me read a quotation or so around here here he quotes Solzhenitsyn the Russian

who gave the remarkable Nobel address at Harvard who says let us not forget that violence does not exist by itself and cannot do so it is necessarily interwoven with lies violence finds its only refuge in falsehood falsehood its only support in violence any man who has once acclaimed violence as his method must inexorably choose falsehood as his principle there's a connection between the use of violence and the lie and we see it in our text these men being Jews do exceedingly disturb our city and they teach customs that are not lawful for us to receive as if these men are concerned for the righteousness of law as if they're

trying to maintain the peace or the decorum of their city it's a lie and just as lies were employed to bring Stephen to a place of execution and martyrdom lies were

employed to betray Jesus lies were employed against Paul and Silas and they'll be employed against us there's a conjunction between lies and violence which is a characteristic of the powers of the air some of the quotes that were impressive when I read them are not equally as impressive when I'm standing here here's a beautiful statement tremendously significant typically he writes each and every stratagem and resort of the principalities seeks the death of the specific faculty of rational and moral comprehension which specially distinguishes human beings from all other creatures whatever form or appearance it may take demonic aggression always aims at the immobilization or surrender or destruction of the mind and at the neutralization or abandonment or demoralization of the conscience in

the fall the purpose and effort of every principality is the dehumanization of human life categorically okay, don't get scared the powers of the air who major on death who are the enemies of God who are usurpers who want to draw the loyalties of men away from God and to themselves as the gods of this world love to ruin and to mar whatever is made in God's image that's why homosexuality is so blatant women's lib the blurring of distinction between the sexes even in their appearances the hair of the women getting shorter the hair of the men getting longer the feminization of men the masculinization of women are evidences of these powers working to blur and to mar the image that God intended in the distinction between sexes because there's a genius of something there and a mystery there that

God is wanting to bring forth to make of the two one new creature what can we say about the mob the crowd joined in attacking them the same ones who are the victims of the powers instead of seeing a hope for their own deliverance come against the men who might have been their help they themselves are so ruined in their own minds their own thoughts they are so victim to the system that the powers have encouraged that they attack the very ones whom they should be uplifting we need to see this that the minds of men their thought life I'm always telling my kids if they stay in front of the TV set too long their brains are going to be turned into scrambled eggs there's no such thing as neutrality there's no such thing as sitting in front of the set and just being faintly amused or entertained

something is happening something erosive something is happening to our faculties of discernment our ability to be clear a dullness comes into our spirits the same thing can happen in church it can happen when there are words going forth that are not sincere and not true although technically they're scripturally sound there's no such thing as neutrality if we're not moving in truth something else is happening if we can't praise if something is not working in the reality of God and we're going through a mock motion a dullness is coming into our corporate spirit and into our individual life that's what he's saying in this statement it's the stratagem and the resort of the principalities that seeks death of the faculties of rational and moral comprehension and that's why we're seeing child

molestation abuse rape murder mayhem and such things as were unheard of a generation ago are now becoming ordinary happenstance because where is the sensitivity? where is the sensibility? where is the sense of revulsion? where is the sense of horror? where is the sense of guilt or shame? there's not even today the ability even to blush at the most horrendous kind of crime against one's own children we have become so habituated to these kinds of things that the conscience has been dulled and the mind has been dulled and you can believe that this is already a statement of how powerfully the powers of the air are working to bring down an entire mankind what do Paul and Silas do when they find themselves bound in a dungeon with their backs hanging in ribbons having been beaten with many rods

publicly disrobed can you imagine this for an orthodox pharisee? the sensibility of Paul to be an open thing in the marketplace before the rulers and the magistrates and I hope by the way you didn't pass over that lightly no accident that the judgment of society comes in the marketplace where the magistrates have their rule that there's a conjunction between the economy and the political order and that the fury and fiendishness of both falls on Paul and Silas to the point that they're beaten within an inch of their lives virtually left for dead no one to attend their wounds thrown into some stinking inner dungeon with the smell of human feces and urine and the moaning of prisoners and the scurrying of rats and vermin thousands of miles from Jerusalem or from Antioch not any hope that

anyone would even know of their location or that they're ever going to get out of that pit in which they thought that they were being obedient to the heavenly vision that came to Paul by dream it's a formula for despair it's a formula for someone to throw in the towel to nod his fist in God's face and say, where are you? and what kind of God are you that's allowed me who sought to be a diligent servant to come to such a hopeless impasse as this everything speaks despair and hopelessness and futility and imminent death how many of us would be singing hallelujah then and saying our amens then and here comes the most powerful verse that I think I know in the whole New Testament that I've read from the first moment I ever read it but at midnight the darkest hour when things seem absolutely

hopeless when the powers are playing upon you in doubt and da-da-da-da-da-da where's your God now? and you're hopeless in your condition and you're going to die of gangrene and you'll never be heard from again and you even missed God you thought that you saw a heavenly vision that bid you come to Macedonia you should have stayed in Asia where the church was being added to daily you blew it, you missed it you're going to die, you're going to rot you never were an apostle you're worthless you've been lost to the purposes of God it's not just physical abuse it's moral so everything calculated to drive a man to be pulverized and to give up and to surrender to the wisdom of the powers of the air already but it says at midnight Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises unto God what we need is a

minute's respectful silence that this is if we wanted to find one single distinguishing characteristic of true apostolicity this is it it's one statement but it sums up everything men who are able to praise God in the midst of their severest affliction and duress it's celebration in the midst of suffering it's the triumph of a wisdom of God contrary to the wisdom of the powers the powers have ventilated their fury their abuse and their violence on these apostles to the point almost of their death but these men in the wisdom of God have received this suffering as somehow coming through the hand of God that somehow God's sovereignty permits this and that in fact they're not just unlucky victims of some stratagem of God but they're privileged to share in his sufferings for which they can

rejoice I mean either that's insanity or it's another kind of wisdom altogether of which the world knows nothing and to believe that and act in that wisdom and that enormous confidence in the sovereignty of God despite the circumstance so as to praise him in the midst of it is an absolute destruction to the forces of darkness that thought that they were having the upper hand no accident in that very moment suddenly there was a great earthquake and everyone's bonds were loosed and the doors burst open the foundations of the prison were shaken excuse me for getting poetic but I think it means much more than that individual dungeon I think that the foundations of the prison were shaken I think that the unspoken premises and assumptions of that society were shaken I think something so

powerful broke in to the forces of darkness that had permeated that Roman society and outpost and civilization that it's never going to recover it was an enormous intrusion a death blow something new

coming from another mode of life from heaven into the earth that was going to set back the forces of darkness and release many captives not the least of which were the prisoners who heard them it says, and the prisoners heard them don't you love the terseness of the scripture? the brevity no explanation but you know that you know that you're going to see every one of these men in heaven the lowest scurvy rats the rejects, the refuse of this filthy and vicious system predicated on false premises those men who had no hope heard a new thing for the first time that came to them from another realm

altogether that was a greater reality than that in which they had lived up to that time they heard men able to praise God in the midst of their deepest affliction the prisoners heard them and they'll be prisoners no more even if they remain in their cells they'll be prisoners no more because he who is free in Christ is free indeed as a matter of fact I don't know if we'll finish this tonight I don't think so when the prison keeper awakes from his sleep and sees the prison doors open and is ready to kill himself Paul says, do yourself no harm we're all here we're not going anywhere we're not in the cell because of happenstance or accident or mistake and neither will be out of the cell by anything that is human or volitional or accidental our movements are of God in Him we live and move and

have our being and we're as much free behind the bars as outside them in fact if there was any man who was captive and bound it was the prison keeper himself who had the keys and was ready to kill himself because he thought that the prisoners had fled and what about my social security and will I get my pension he was a slave to fear for security and for that reason he could inflict agonies upon men and live tremulously for his own security but is that living? it says he called for a light and he sprang in and he fell down trembling and he said to Paul and Silas man, what must I do to be saved? how do I come to this place where you are? how do I come into this glorious freedom that is completely above circumstance that is unaffected by suffering that enables you to rejoice in the midst of

affliction that makes you though you're the lowliest been cast into the lowliest place to be exalted above the very authorities who publicly humiliated and drove you there that's salvation how do I get saved like that? whatever that is, that's what I want I want to be free from these powers that have jerked me and manipulated me a whole lifetime long that made me fearful for my security for my pension not to offend the authorities to keep my nose clean to live a narrow and circumscribed life which indeed has not been living at all but I see in you in this cell more freedom a vista of such proportion that it eclipses anything that I could have ever known what must I do to be saved? this writer asked the question seeing the influence of the principalities and powers and I'll end with this

tonight which are themselves fallen powers acting in a fallen world and bringing such afflictions upon mankind and the church what are we numerically and in our strength what should we do? and he writes whatever is the apparent outcome the humanizing experience is the resistance to death the only way to live humanly is not to be a patsy the only way to really live is not to go the way of all flesh the only way to truly live is to defy these powers and not to subscribe to the unspoken premises by which entire generations are jerked and manipulated to come to such a place that no matter how adverse the circumstance to believe the sovereignty of God that has brought you there and that somehow there is a purpose in that suffering and in that affliction if it's no more than the release of the

prisoners it's reason enough and to rejoice in that because we don't live by the thing that is visible and seen or felt but we walk by faith and not by sight we see the thing that is eternal and invisible and the eternal weight of glory and that eternal weight of glory will enable us to endure whatever is provoked against us by opposing the powers that have led mankind captive do you believe that? do you believe

that? do we have a faith for that? have we come to that apostolic faith? is it deeply in our spirits? are we manifesting it in our lifestyle? do we walk through our jobs without batting an eyelash whether someone else is getting promoted and we're being ignored? do we worry that we don't get the raise? are we affected by the rise and fall of the stock market or our securities or

the prospect of pension or any of those things? do people see us as walking through life completely unaffected by circumstance? does our life match our profession and give our words weight and authority to take the battle to the enemy and to declare that you're lost false presumer and a jerker and a manipulator of men but your game is over we're blowing the whistle on you we're going to show an entire mankind there's another alternative there's another way to live without fear and without regard to circumstance in Him who made of you an open spoil in Him we move and live and have our being whether it's in a cell or out whether we get the raise or we don't whether we beggar ourselves with giving for the work of God and wonder how then can we make it to the end of the month and yet rejoice

he writes, hope is reliance upon grace in the face of death this fear of death that has kept mankind forever in bondage are you afraid to die? when you've broken that fear of what shall you be afraid when you say grave where is your terror and death where is your sting of what shall you be afraid you get a symptom or something comes into your throat or your body is aching and can it be cancer? can it be this? can it be that? and you begin being riddled by fear and sometimes your fears come upon you can we move through these things undistracted letting them fall away because God has triumphed over the grave in His resurrection and we are eminently the people of that resurrection it's another alternative another mode of life and the only one that can contradict the powers of the air and

bring them to their final ruin and establish for mankind a basis for life that is in keeping with their God intended humanity to live in truth to live freely to live authentically to live without fear look there's a people who have done so the kingdom of heaven is at hand hallelujah I want to pray for us my God may we come to this Lord in Jesus name I want to declare freedom I want to declare liberty for the captive of any soul in this room who is fearful for their body for their health for their future for their security for anyone who is going through circumstances and has been completely taken up by them to the place where they cannot praise at midnight my God make us worshippers who love you so who recognize that you are so the Lord so the sovereign God so the ruler of all things

who's bringing every authority under your feet who's called us to freedom in Christ to move through this world my God as having dominion over it and not being dominated by it or its systems precious God blow the trump Lord and set the captives free let it be seen in our faces in our ease and in our peace in our freedom from anxiety or distress about the future what's gonna happen Lord we praise you we worship you we want to be ultimate worshippers not just when we're well fed and comfortable and in the presence of the saints but at midnight in our darkest hour and in an hour of affliction that will come if we go on with you we're gonna bring it upon us persecution must come if we dare stand against these powers but when it comes what a glorious opportunity to shake the foundations and

burst open the prison doors to loose the captives and to defeat them once and for all having done their worst your praises are yet triumphant Lord groom us for this and prepare us for this in our present life in our situations marital difficulty family difficulty bodily difficulty whatever it is may we see it as an opportunity given of God to be groomed to be prepared to come to maturity and understanding and overcoming triumph in that very thing make us apostolic we pray to the glory of God and to the freedom of captives and we'll thank you and give you the praise in Jesus holy name and God's people said Amen

bless you bless the Lord anybody has need for personal prayer we welcome you to come appreciate your continuing prayer for these weeks as they unfold and remember Zaire take it to

the Lord

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