

“Fearless Worship”

Reading: Exodus 35:30-36:1; Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 96

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

I have never been in prison, but I’m pretty sure that it’s not a pleasant place. As violent and as dehumanizing as prison is today, it’s probably far, far better than what Paul and Silas faced. We probably can’t come close to imagining what it was like, but we can guess some of it. These were two men who had been empowered by God to go out in mission, chosen and sent out by the church to preach the gospel, and they had been faithful to that call. They were investing their own time, energy, and money in this mission; they were fully devoted to it. And they were effective at what they were doing. They were bearing fruit through their work, planting churches, saving souls, growing disciples, setting captives free.

But suddenly it all went wrong, and they were arrested on trumped-up charges. They were denied the justice of a trial and were severely flogged, which meant that they were brutally whipped. Flogging was a severe enough punishment that it could easily kill you, because it shredded the skin and muscle of your back. In that state, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison, chained in stocks, and left there. Just try to imagine being numb with pain, exhausted from the loss of blood, unable to move because of the chains, unable to see in the dark of the pit, probably lying on your face in the mud to protect your wounded back, angry at the unjust treatment you’ve suffered, wondering what went wrong and whether God has forsaken you in what might literally be a God-forsaken hole in the ground. Let’s face it, I get unbearable if I miss my bedtime or a meal; I would not be doing well in their situation. But suddenly, in the pitch black of the middle of the night, maybe quietly at first and then building strength, Paul and Silas raise their voices in song. Not just any song, not “99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall” to pass the time, but hymns of praise to God.

A lot of people start blaming God when bad things happen, or at least they start asking Him why He is allowing them to happen. Nobody enjoys pain or persecution. You don’t laugh when someone beats you. And yet here are Paul and Silas, in the dark and the mud, bleeding and shackled, singing in the pit. Why would they do that? They were fearless worshipers of God. Their worship would not be stopped by fear. That kind of worship can only come from a life that has been cultivated with worship. In other words, if you want to sing when you’re in the pit, you have to practice singing when you’re on level ground.

This is one of those practices that we can build into our lives if we want to take a step toward becoming deep, beautiful, fearless people of Jesus Christ. Just like giving our money or simplifying our lifestyle are spiritually formative acts because they train us to fearlessly trust God’s provision, and just like prayer helps deepen us because it builds our relationship with God, the practice of worship prepares us spiritually by driving out fear. These are things we can incorporate into our lives not because they’re magical actions that make God do things for us or because they earn our way to heaven, but because they prepare the soil of our lives to make us ready for God to do great things in us.

We read a few verses from the book of Exodus that show us how seriously God takes worship. It takes place during the time when God is in the process of leading His people out of slavery in Egypt and into the wilderness so that He can form them into a nation devoted to Him. Part of that process

was giving them a house of worship, and since they were nomads at that point, their place of worship had to move with them. God therefore gave them very specific dimensions and descriptions of what this very elaborate tent would look like, but more than that, God chose certain people named Bezalel and Oholiab to do most of the work. And Exodus says specifically that Bezalel was filled with the Spirit of God, which is unexpected. Usually in the Old Testament, people are only filled with the Holy Spirit for extraordinary purposes like leading the people in a great battle, or prophets are filled with the Spirit to pronounce some specific word of God to the people. But here we have artists filled with the Spirit to do their artistic work. It's a sign of the importance God places on His people's daily worship, and it's a sign that God values much more than just preaching and doing good works: it's not only the pastors and the soup kitchen volunteers whose work is valued by God. Anyone who uses their gifts for God's glory is welcome to receive a measure of His Spirit.

And that's really what worship comes down to. Worship is using the gifts God has given us, infusing them with His presence, and making something beautiful in His honor. It can be something we do together, or something we do privately. It can be something lots of people see and use, or maybe no one but you and God will ever know about it. It can come through song, through spoken words, through writing, through art, or through the craftsmanship of working with your hands. Worship takes the stuff of everyday life and elevates it for heaven's purposes, and in so doing it raises our eyes and our hands and our lives toward God. This is why Paul and Silas were singing in that pit, because worship was the only way that they could be lifted up.

We need to be people who worship God daily, not just on Sundays, if we're going to become deep, beautiful, fearless people. Many ancient prayer practices involve at least some singing as part of the prayer, so one way to do this is to include a verse or two of a hymn into your daily prayer time. Pick a hymn that's familiar to you, or find one online, or get a songbook, and read or sing some of the verses as part of your prayer. If you can't find any hymns to use, the entire book of Psalms is made up of ancient hymns; it was the hymnbook of ancient Israel. Read one as part of your prayer.

We use these songs of praise because worship gives us language for speaking to God that we would not otherwise have. You can sing things that you can't put into words otherwise. I'm not generally a fan of musicals, because it just doesn't compute to me how large groups of people can spontaneously burst into a unified song and dance routine without any preparation, but even though I don't really like them, I can still appreciate the fact that songs can convey emotions and meanings that mere words can't. Singing the songs of others also expands our worship vocabulary. If you're anything like me, it's easy to get stuck in certain ruts, saying the same basic things and praying the same basic prayers in the same ways. But as we sing the songs of the church, we pick up new ideas and new phrases, new ways of speaking about God and to God. Those songs can become a part of us in surprising ways, and then we can draw on them later when we need them.

And at the same time, worship is a way for us to draw together in the life of our church. It's a way for all of us to have one conversation with God, to feel the same things together, to use one voice in praise of Him. We sing songs like "Amazing Grace" or "Just As I Am," songs that connect us with millions of other Christians through the ages. Or we sing songs written by Charles Wesley or Martin Luther, and we participate in the ageless worship offered by the church. We need this worship with the body of Christ to help keep us grounded in something larger than our own preferences. We

need to hear the worship of those around us, to be exposed to different styles and new (or old!) thoughts on how to praise God.

I've mentioned before that we changed the "Special Music" in our bulletin to "Offering of Worship" because we want to reflect what we're really doing during that time. The point is not to sit through a mini-concert. Our singers don't get up here to impress everyone with their singing. The point is for us as a congregation to bring something with us to worship, so that our time together is not just me and Pastor Carey planning things out for you and you following the script. That offering of worship is a time for the body of the church to participate and bring something with you, to bring your gifts to the larger congregation for the glory of God to make something beautiful, because you don't *watch* worship, you *participate* in worship.

And so we need to build those habits of worship into our daily lives. If we're going to be able to sing when we're in the pit, we need to practice while we're on the level ground. Worship God in your private, daily life in whatever way is best for you and honoring to Him, and participate in the regular worship of the body of Christ. Practice while you're on the level ground of everyday life. But that practice then forms us so that when we find ourselves in the pit, like Paul and Silas, we will naturally respond by worshipping God. This is what we mean by "fearless" worship, because the pit is usually a place of fear, not praise. When we go through those times of trouble and persecution and pain and uncertainty, fear is the natural response. Our first reaction is to let the darkness have power over us. But singing in the pit, however, is a proclamation that there is a greater power than whatever darkness we face, and our Lord will save us regardless of the circumstances.

Bezalel and Oholiab used their abilities to build the tabernacle, to create a physical structure marking a space for a nation to gather in worship of God. Paul and Silas used their voices to mark the darkness of a pit as not being too dark for God's light to break forth; a despairing prison cell was transformed into a forum for sharing the hope of Christ with the lost. Worship is one of those things we do that is not purely practical. It is something our world has a hard time understanding because it doesn't seem to accomplish much; it seems gratuitous. But when we use what God has given us to mark out some space or some time as belonging to God, we are living as we were made to live. We are doing what we were made to do: participating in the redemption of the world, fearlessly fighting back the chaos and darkness of life apart from God.

There is deep power in the art we create with our voices and our hands. Singing can be an unshakable challenge to the darkness. I think of how enduring some of the protest songs of the past have been. Maybe you're familiar with the simple yet powerful song "We Shall Overcome," that song that rallied the Civil Rights movement of the last century, a song that is haunting and emotional and nonviolent, and yet it stood as a direct challenge to those who would deny rights to others. When we crouch in the mud of the pit and raise our tiny voices against the darkness in worship of the God who wraps Himself in light, we are proclaiming to our jailers, to our tormenters, to our demons, that we do not fear them and they do not have power over us, because our faith is in Jesus Christ our risen Lord. We will cry out to Him for help before we cry out to them for mercy, and then we will praise Him when He saves us. It is a statement of abiding faith to worship God while we're in the pit, because that can be the hardest time to trust Him.

Fearless worship is a life of worship, a life of taking whatever gifts God has given us and using them to make something beautiful in His honor, and it lifts our eyes and hearts toward Him. It's something we do to challenge the darkness, and it's something that points us toward the light. We do it together, and we do it privately. We sing in the pit, and we sing on the level grounds of life. What is your practice of worship? What space can you mark out as belonging to God our King? What beauty can you create by using your voice or the work of your hands, in song, in word, in paint, in wood, in stone, in fabric, in whatever God has given you? What victories has God worked in you in this area? What goal might you make to take a step further in your fearless worship? How can you raise your voice in uninterrupted praise of the God who saves?



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