

Midnight Melodies (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

¹⁶As 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 fortune-telling. ¹⁷She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” ¹⁸And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹But 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. ²⁰And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. ²¹They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” ²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them . . . (Acts 16:16-25)

Framing These Sermons

- A. This is an astounding story. It continues on down through the rest of [ch. 16](#), and it just gets better. It’s going to take us a couple weeks to really do it justice.
 - 1. And what I want to do first is quickly show you how I’m planning to frame this and next time’s message . . .
- B. On the whole, as you read through this story, one of the things I think you come to see quite clearly is that there’s essentially two different kinds of people being presented here, with two different approaches to life.
 - 1. On the one hand, we see people, like these slave-owners here, trying to get their best life now—exploiting others if they have to in order to gain for themselves.
 - a. And do you know what? They lose in the end.
 - 2. But then, on the other hand, we see people like these missionaries—Paul and Silas among others.
 - a. And, though at first it sure seems like they’re losing big here,
 - b. we soon realize, because they’re “losing” their lives for Jesus’ sake, they come to gain more than we could have ever imagined by the time all this is done.

- C. It's a lot like what Jesus says in [Luke 9:24-25](#): “²⁴ [W]hoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?” There’s your two kinds of people:
 - 1. Some try so hard to gain, but lose.
 - 2. Others lose, but end up gaining.
- D. And that’s really the organizing structure I’m going to use for this and next time’s sermon.
 - 1. We’ve got two main points drawn from these two basic approaches to life and profit and all this: (1) We Gain . . . But Lose; and (2) We Lose . . . But Gain!
 - a. That second point we’ll get to today and we’ll talk about how we gain joy, but it’s going to take us a whole other week to fully unpack the rest of it.

(1) We Gain . . . But Lose

Following the Story

- A. For this, as I said, I really just want to make sure we see what’s happening with these slave-“owners” here in particular. And I figure the best way to do that is to just go verse-by-verse through some of this.
- B. So first, in [v. 16](#), we meet their “slave girl” whom Luke tells us “[had a spirit of divination and \(again\) brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.](#)”
 - 1. This demonic spirit that held her captive proved to be quite profitable for her owners as people would often consult someone like this looking for guidance. And they’d pay good money for it.
- C. Then the story takes a bit of a surprising turn when this girl comes to encounter Paul and Silas and the rest of these missionaries on their way “[to the place of prayer](#)” ([v. 16](#)).
 - 1. You would expect, perhaps, that the demon within her would recoil with disgust and maybe slander would spill out her mouth at these men. But that’s not exactly what happens, is it?
 - 2. Instead, we read in [v. 17](#) that “[\[s\]he followed Paul and us, crying out, ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.’](#)”
 - a. Now, to be clear, she’s not wrong.
 - b. But neither is she there to help.
 - i. It’s a good reminder to us that the devil sometimes hides his slanderous intentions under saintly masks. It’s as Paul says, in [2 Cor. 11:14](#): “[Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.](#)”
- D. But what exactly was the demon trying to accomplish here? We’re not sure.

1. Maybe it was trying to draw unwanted attention to them in some way, stir up the crowds.
 2. Maybe it was trying to confuse people into thinking they're all on the same team.
- E. Whatever the case, Paul would have none of it. So we read in v. 18 that, after this went on for many days, finally, "Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour."
1. Now, I realize, the picture we might get of this whole scene, at least at first, is quite humorous actually.
 - a. Here we have an annoyed Paul who has finally had enough of this girl's belligerent—albeit materially accurate—outcries, so he finally relieves her of the demon just to relieve himself of the noise. "What's a missionary got to do to get some peace and quiet around here? I can't work with all this racket. I'm trying reach the city for Jesus. Pipe down lady."
 - i. It's a bit funny, admittedly.
 2. But I do think this initial picture we get is not a fair representation of the facts when we really peer beneath the surface a bit.
 - a. In particular, there is a very real possibility that the Greek here translated "greatly annoyed" might be better translated as "burdened" or "disturbed" (BDAG) or even "grieved" (KJV).
 - b. That simple adjustment paints an entirely different picture, doesn't it?
 - i. Now, suddenly, Paul is not seen as exorcising this demon to merely shut this girl up, but to help her, to free her.
 - ii. He's burdened by her burdens, troubled by her troubles.
 - iii. His is not so much an outburst of irritation but an extension of compassion.
- F. Whatever the case, the whole scene reminds us of the power that can be unleashed in Jesus' name. The authority differential here is staggering.
1. This girl has been in the claws of a demon for who knows how long.
 2. And all Paul has to do is turn and say: "In the name of Jesus, go!"—and he's off, running like a trembling little lamb before a lion.
- G. Now, as we might expect, this slave-girl's owners are frustrated at all this, and we're told that "they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers" (v. 19).

We'll look at their specific charges in a moment, but for now make note of what came of them:

1. First, note that "the crowd joined in attacking them" (v. 22). This was mob violence at its most ruthless.
2. Next, we're told that "the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods" (v. 22).

- a. The fact that these Roman officials tore their clothes off served a double purpose.
 - i. On the one hand it would only enhance their physical pain. For the bundle of wooden rods swung down would meet not with a layer of cloth cushioning the blow, but a man's tender flesh.
 - ii. But then on the other hand it wasn't just physical pain they were after with this. There's an element of emotional and social agony caused by this as well. They stripped them naked to shame them. This is why Paul would later write to the Thessalonians of how they had "suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi . . ." (1 Thess. 2:2).
- 3. But they didn't stop there. So we read in vv. 23-24: " ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks."
- a. There's a sense of hopelessness to this, really.
- b. And that's what makes the hope and joy they still have so stunning.
 - i. We'll look at that in just a moment, when we transition to the second point.
 - ii. But I said I wanted to circle back to the charges these owners brought to the magistrates over and against Paul and Silas . . .

"Hope for Gain"

- A. I'm particularly interested in this because, as we start to consider it, here is where we begin to see more clearly what's actually motivating these guys. And it's all driven, wouldn't you know it, by their pursuit of gain in the here and now.
- B. V. 19 is the key: " ¹⁹ 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.
 - 1. The issue was gain. Their hope was tethered to the demon. So when the demon was gone, so too was their hope for any profit.
- C. So they were furious. This is why they seized Paul and Silas and brought them in before the rulers.
 - 1. But then notice how, suddenly, as they stand before the magistrates, they slyly shift their reasoning around a bit.
 - a. We know their hearts. We know what's really motivating them. Profit. Material gain. That's why they're rejecting Jesus and these missionaries.
 - b. But that's not what they say on the surface. They give other reasons. Reasons these Roman magistrates could get behind.

2. Look at vv. 20-21: “²⁰ And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city.’²¹ They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.”
 - a. On this, one commentator remarks: “The slave owners were very clever. They not only concealed the real reason for their anger, which was economic, but also presented their legal charge against the missionaries ‘in terms that appealed to the latent anti-Semitism of the people (“these men are Jews”) and their racial pride (“us Romans”)’ and so ‘ignited the flames of bigotry’” (BST).
 - b. Beyond this, note the accusation there that these men “are disturbing our city” (v. 20).
 - i. These “magistrates” here would have been, in particular, the Roman officials appointed with the explicit purpose of maintaining civil order in the area.
 - ii. As such, any talk of Paul and Silas disturbing that order would have been especially concerning for them.
- (1) The slave-owners choose their words wisely. They know what they are doing. They’re trying to strike a nerve, to get a swift and substantial response, lest any more of their profit margins suffer at the hands of these Jewish Christians.

3. And, as we saw, it works.

“Smokescreen Skeptics”

- A. But, now, here’s something I don’t want us to miss: A lot of times, when people are objecting to or rejecting Jesus, the dynamic in play is actually very similar to what we see here.
- B. We are often what I’d call “smokescreen skeptics.”
 1. What I mean is: we say we can’t believe for all of these intellectual, rational reasons, and we sound all smart and sophisticated as we make our case against him.
 2. But underneath these reasons of the mind, lurk some very different reasons in the heart.
 - a. At the bottom, it’s really quite simple: the reason I don’t believe, is that I don’t want to.
 - b. I want something else, and I’m afraid Jesus is going to threaten that.
 - i. I don’t want to surrender control. I don’t want to let go of the reins.
 - ii. I want gain in the here and now, and following Christ seems like taking a loss to me.
 - iii. I’d have to give up this way of life, these secret pleasures, those pursuits, and so forth. And I don’t want to.
 3. So I put forward a whole set of other reasons as to why faith in Jesus is illogical or whatever. We point to this or that fact and make this or that argument against him.

4. But it's all just a smokescreen, covering and clouding over the deeper issue.
 - a. It's as Jesus says in [John 3:19](#): "[T]he light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness"
 - i. It's what you love that's the issue. You see the light, you just don't love it (cf. [Rom. 1:18-32](#)).
- C. Notice, with these owners, there appears to be virtually no concern for the validity of the facts or the claims of these Christian missionaries.
 1. One would think if you just watched Paul cast a demon out of that girl with a mere word spoken "[in the name of Jesus](#)" ([v. 18](#)), you might be at least a little curious about who this Jesus is. He has the power to heal, to save, to restore. I just saw it with my own two eyes. "Who is this? Paul, Silas, tell me more!"
 2. But that's not what they say. Because that's not what matters to them.
 - a. They're not fundamentally motivated by truth and a pursuit of the facts here.
 - b. They're motivated by gain, and their own immediate sense of it. "I don't care whether this Jesus is true or false, real or fake, I'm just upset that my profit margins are slimming. Whoever this Jesus Christ is, he is a threat to that for me, and for that I want him gone. And I want you gone."
- D. And, again, if we're honest, we must admit how similar we can be sometimes.
 1. Now, of course, I'm not saying that there are not real intellectual hurdles sometimes for people when it comes to receiving Jesus.
 - a. Maybe you're not a Christian in here today and you have real questions, real doubts.
 - b. That's okay. That's good even. Jesus would walk with and help along any who were genuinely asking and wanting to know truth.
 2. But I am saying, that a lot of times, if you dig under people's objections a bit, you do find something deeper going on.
 - a. They don't want the claims of Christianity to be true because they think Jesus is going to keep them from what they want.
 - b. They have no idea that truly Jesus desires to give us even more . . . if we'd let him.
- E. Listen: the real threat to your "gain" isn't receiving Jesus, it's rejecting him.
 1. You leave him for gain, and you lose in the end.
 2. But if you lose your life for his sake, you gain a million times over . . . in this life and the next!

(2) We Lose . . . But Gain!

- A. When we look at the fullness of the story as it carries on from here to the end of [Acts 16](#), we'll see four things in particular that we gain from following Jesus.

1. But today my focus is only on the first of those four. And it's what I'm calling Invincible Joy.

Gain #1: Invincible Joy

- A. Invincible Joy. That's what you gain when you come to Jesus. This is what comes out there in [v. 25](#) in particular.

1. After all these guys had been through, who would've blamed them if they wanted to spend their night grumbling and complaining and whining.
2. But that's not what they're doing. Instead . . . they're singing: ["About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God . . ."](#)

- B. The word translated ["singing hymns"](#) there in the Greek, it's [humneō](#), which the standard lexicon defines as: ["to sing a song in a cultic \[or worship\] setting, esp. of praise and celebration; to sing in praise to; to sing in praise of"](#) (BDAG).

1. So let's be clear, this is not a sad song they're singing. It's not a psalm of lament or imprecation.
 - a. They're not singing one of those psalms where David's like: "Where are you God? How long until you answer me? It feels like you've abandoned me."
 - b. It's fine to sing those kind of songs. But, let me tell you, this isn't one of them. This is a song of praise, of celebration, of joy.
 - i. Though they just got fists and rods, bars and shackles—though their teeth are busted and their lips are bloodied, it doesn't stop them from opening their mouths and making midnight melodies to the Lord their God.

- C. And I just want to ask: How?! How is this a thing? How is this for real? And, for goodness sake, how do I get this in my own life? I want invincible joy. Where does that come from?

- D. Well, of course, as I've been saying, the long and short of it is that it comes from Jesus.

1. Because these owners had tethered their hope and joy to a "vincible" thing, their joy was vincible—able to be overcome or conquered or disposed of.
2. But because our joy as Christians is tethered to Jesus and he is invincible—neither Satan, nor sin, nor even death could overcome him—so too is our joy . . . invincible.
 - a. It's the logic of [Rom. 8:31-37](#): ["31 If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? . . . 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . . 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."](#)

- i. If we have his all-conquering love, then we have all we need for invincible joy.
- E. So, of course, the answer is Jesus. But there is more we can say on this point.
 - 1. You see, I think one of the keys to having joy in suffering like this is knowing what God is doing in suffering for you.
 - a. When you get a sense of what he's up to in it—how he's working for your good even in the hard—it makes it more palatable. You're able to rejoice and praise him, even though it hurts, sometimes terribly so.
 - 2. And so that's what I wanted to consider here with you with the time we have left.
 - a. In Scripture, I see many things that God is up to in our suffering, I'll give you just three . . .

#1: He Is Taking Us Deeper into His Heart

- A. What I mean by this is, in suffering I think a door is opening for deeper fellowship with Jesus. We come to know him and his love in ways that we just otherwise couldn't when the sun was shining.
 - 1. I can tell you personally, some of the hardest times of my life have been the sweetest times with Jesus.
- B. I think this is what Paul is writing about in [Phil. 3](#), when he says: “⁷ [W]hatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ . . .¹⁰ [—] that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death . . . (vv. 7-8, 10).

Three things to make note of:

- 1. First, you can see how Paul is riffing on the ideas given by Jesus as we saw in [Luke 9:24-25](#). If you truly want to gain, you need to lose all for Christ.
 - a. If we're ever going to get to a place where we stop bellyaching every time any suffering comes our way, settling on this truth is critical.
- 2. But then, second, and more to the point, notice in [v. 8](#) what he says you get when you suffer loss for Jesus: you get to “[know](#)” him at a deeper level.
 - a. That word “[know](#)” doesn't just mean intellectual comprehension in some abstract way.
 - b. It's a word used in Scripture to describe even how a husband knows his wife in the marriage bed. It speaks to a deep and intimate understanding. And it only comes to you in and through loss, through hardship, through suffering.

3. Which is why, third thing, he speaks there in [v. 10](#) of “[shar\[ing\]](#)” in Jesus’ suffering. It’s the Greek word [koinōnia](#), and it means “fellowship.”
 - a. And I think, again, this hints at the communion with Jesus that is made available to the Christian in suffering. You don’t suffer alone. You suffer with him.
- C. I wonder if you noticed how what Paul and Silas experience here in our text so clearly maps onto what Jesus himself experienced back in the last days of his earthy life?
1. Jesus was seized by jealous men in pursuit of earthly gain.
 2. He was dragged before the Roman authorities and falsely accused.
 3. He was stripped naked and beaten bloody.
 4. And where Paul and Silas were put behind bars with their feet in stocks, Jesus’ experience went even further—he was hung from that cross, with his feet nailed to the beam.
 5. And there he suffered not merely the wrath of Jew or Gentile . . . but the wrath of God due my sin. He did all of that in love for you and for me.
 - a. And you’ve got to know, as Paul and Silas are experiencing this, they are thinking of him, and reflecting on all he did for them.
 - b. And they’re coming to comprehend more of his love for them, even as, especially as, they’re suffering for him . . . with him.
- D. So, listen, if you are in a place of suffering right now . . .
1. I’m sorry, I am sure it hurts. I’m not trying to make any less of that. Jesus wouldn’t make any less of that. He weeps with those who weep.
 2. But I do want you to know that, in your suffering, a door is opening for richer fellowship with your suffering Savior. He’s right here. And he wants to take you deeper.
 - a. Instead of trying so desperately to get rid of your suffering at all costs, fix it, numb it, whatever . . .
 - b. . . go through that door and throw yourself into his nail-pierced hands (cf. [2 Cor. 12:7-10](#)).

#2: He Is Conforming Us More into His Image

- A. In our day, we tend to exalt immediate comfort as the ultimate good. Whatever keeps me from pain is what I want now and always.
1. But in Scripture, and in the gospel, comfort isn’t the ultimate good, conformity to Christ is.
 2. You were created in the image of God, to reflect him like a mirror out into all the world.
 - a. In our sin we broke that mirror as it were and we only reflect him now in flickers and flashes.
 - b. But Jesus has come to put us back together, to make us fully human again, to renew us in that image (cf. [Rom. 8:29](#)).

- B. And one of the ways he does that is through suffering.
1. So when it comes, we don't have to grumble as if God is trying to kill us.
 2. We can, even through tears, rejoice, because he's remaking us, he's healing us.
- C. Rom. 5:3-5: “³ [W]e rejoice in our sufferings [why? how?], knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”
1. You see a little bit of #1 and #2 there, don't you?
 - a. Through suffering, we get more of his love,
 - b. and we get more of his character. It's a refining fire.
- D. When you really think about it, the fruit of the Spirit can only really be known and developed on the vines of trial and tribulation.
1. So take “peace” for example. How do you truly know you're growing in peace that comes from the Spirit of God?
 - a. Anyone can have apparent peace when times are good.
 - b. It's only when everything falls apart that the real spiritual fruit separates itself.
 2. Or what about “patience”?
 - a. You don't need patience for people who are kind and considerate of you. Anyone is “patient” with those people.
 - b. It's only when you come to face a real self-centered beast that you start to see whether you have the real thing borne of the Spirit or not.
 3. The same thing could be said on down the line for all the fruit of the Spirit: kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, love, and . . . joy! (cf. Gal. 5:22-23).
- E. So don't despise the hardship and suffering. Don't avoid it all costs. God is shaping you. He's refining you. He's conforming you more into his image.

#3: He Is Preparing Us Further for Glory

- A. I get this, of course, from what Paul writes in 2 Cor. 4: “¹⁶ [W]e do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (vv. 16-18).
1. One of the things suffering accomplishes for us, is it loosens our roots a bit in the soil of this world and settles them a little deeper in the soil of heaven.

B. Tertullian, a prominent theologian back in the second century, reflecting on Paul and Silas singing in prison here, wrote: “The legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven.”

1. I’m not so worried about this because God is preparing me for that.
 - a. If this place were my home, then you better believe I’d be kicking and screaming and fighting my way out of there. This life is all I get. You’re not going to take that from me.
 - b. But if heaven is my home, what’s the worst you can do? Send me there faster! “[T]o live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

C. So where is your heart?

1. If it is attached to hope of gain in the here and now, ironically, you will shoot your joy in the foot.
2. But if it is in heaven with Christ, not even prison and its shackles can keep you from singing.

Conclusion

“While Praying, Were Singing”

A. I want to end here with something that I think is especially important. You see, I’m aware, that as I’m saying all this, the temptation we’ll have is to fake it, to do that Christian plastic “joy” thing where we put on a smile even when we’re dying inside.

1. “Pastor said I’m supposed to have joy in whatever I’m going through. I’m supposed to sing, so here we go.”
2. You sing in church when everyone’s looking and then you go home and cry into your pillow. You’re not singing at midnight. You’re wailing.

B. Here’s where I’d like to draw your attention to one little bit I overlooked from Acts 16:25 there: “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God”

1. I want you to make note of two things . . .

C. First, notice: They weren’t just “singing.” They were also “praying.”

1. The Greek word here especially accents the idea of petitioning God.
2. Which means, listen: They’re not being fake and just praising God through gritted teeth. They’re asking for help too. They’re crying out to him, letting their requests be made known.

D. But then, second, and here’s what I find so interesting (I know there’s been a lot of original language stuff in this sermon, but I promise I try not to do that unless it seems really significant for the point I’m trying to make. And this is, very much so) . . .

1. In the Greek, “praying” is a present participle and “singing hymns” is the imperfect main verb.
 - a. That doesn’t mean anything to you, I know.
 - b. But it means a ton to me. Because it means that this verse could be literally rendered: “About midnight Paul and Silas, while praying, were singing hymns to God”
 - c. You say, again: “So what? I still don’t get it.”
 - d. Well, don’t you see?! It means the praying and the singing, the petitioning and the praising are happening simultaneously.
 - i. My song is simultaneously a prayer.
 - ii. My praise is simultaneously a petition.
 - iii. Sometimes songs of praise are just an overflow of what’s already on my heart.
 - iv. Other times, these songs are more like a prayer than anything else. “God, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ (Mark 9:24).” “I’m singing the praise because I know you’re worthy, but I also really need you to make it true for me right now.”
2. This reminds us of what Paul says of himself in 2 Cor. 6:10, that he is “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing”
 - a. Just because you’re rejoicing doesn’t mean you’re not sorrowful and broken at the same time.
 - b. Just because you’re singing doesn’t mean you’re not sometimes struggling and praying for God’s help as you praise.
 - i. “[W]hile praying, [they] were singing”

E. Maybe that’s where you’re at today.

1. Listen, God doesn’t just want your empty praise.
2. Neither does he just want your moaning and complaining.
3. Bring both sides together. Let your praise be your prayer. “God I know you’re worthy of it. But I’m struggling to believe it. Help bridge the gap for me even as I sing to you!”