

He Shatters the Doors of Bronze

Psalm 107: 1-16

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Gerrit Scott

My dear friend Parker Williamson grew up in this church. His father was a professor at the LSU law school. His mother ran ragged keeping up with her three spirited sons running around Bocage. Their exploits gave his mother plenty of material for her gift of storytelling. Parker became a Presbyterian minister. He was the minister of First Presbyterian in Lenoir, North Carolina before I was. That's how we got to be friends. Some years ago, Parker's wife Patty was training for a bike race to benefit Habitat for Humanity. Biking in the rolling and rising hills of western Carolina takes a lot of training. Coming down the hills can be dangerous. Early one morning, on a rapid descent, Patty lost control of her bike and was thrown. At the emergency room, they found Patty had some ugly bruises and cuts, but was, surprisingly, unbroken. The more Parker and Patty thought about it, though, the more they realized how bad it could have been. Her helmet was shredded. It saved her life. This could have been lethal. A few weeks later, Parker talked to me about a donation they had decided to make to a ministry. It was a huge gift. He told me, "We realized that Patty's life and health were spared. It didn't have to be that way. We just wanted to find a way to say thanks to God for saving her. And to let him know we really mean it." They made a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Not to win God's favor, but to acknowledge his mercy. It gave them joy to do so. I've thought about that for years. It became a very tangible example of a deep spiritual principle: *Let the redeemed of the LORD say so*. When God acts in your life, give him thanks and let someone else know, whether by word or deed.

As we begin to explore today's Psalm, we're considering what it means to participate in God's grace by our tangible response of thanksgiving. Hebrews 13: 15 tell us, "Through [Christ] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name." Once, the people of God had to offer the blood of lambs and bulls in order to make atonement for their sins. They had to offer

blood sacrifices in order to get right with God. But Jesus Christ came to give his life as the final sacrifice for sin. He made a complete atonement for our sins, past, present and future. There is no more need for a sacrifice of blood to reconcile us to God. It has been done, once and for all, on the cross.

Now we are free to give the sacrifice of praise. We don't give this worship in order to get something from God. We give worship in order to acknowledge something already received. Through Christ, we are free to offer worship that celebrates what God has done for us. But it's interesting to note that offering praise is indeed a sacrifice. Worship takes effort. It takes setting aside time. It requires acknowledging our Triune God of Grace. It requires lifting up beyond ourselves to praise, to adore, to describe and to magnify our great God. It requires a sacrifice of mind, creativity, effort and intention. The result of such a sacrifice, however, is a release of joy.

Psalm 107 is a great sacrifice of praise. Its theme is simple: *Let the Redeemed of the LORD say so!* If you have known the healing, transforming, saving power of God in your life, give thanks to God by saying so. With your whole heart and in detail. The Psalm begins, "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands." We have a great God. We worship a God who is good. We worship a God who has redeemed us from the darkness and lostness of living apart from him. Your story may be dramatic or it may be quiet; if you were raised in a Christian home and never knew a time when you did not know Jesus as your savior, that's a story. Give thanks to God that you are one of the rare few spared the suffering of wandering in sin—that in itself is a great and marvelous redemption. But more, this is a community psalm. We are called to remember together how the Triune God of Grace has saved the members of our fellowship and to praise him for that. All our stories belong to all of us!

The Psalm presents four stories of people in trouble that cried out to the LORD and found that he saved them. We'll look at two this week and two next week. It is not hard to see ourselves in these vignettes.

1) *"Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in;*

hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.” The first category of people is the wanderers. They could not find common community in cities, but were lost in trackless lands. Their bodies grew faint and so did their souls. Yes, this immediately makes us think of Israel spending forty years in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. But I believe we are meant to see how that desert wandering was a type for all who get lost on the way:

- That time after high school, from leaving home until settling down in your own home with your mate can be a time of wandering. Young people in their late teens and twenties can feel like they are drifting. What am I supposed to do? What is my calling? Where is my wife, my husband? I can't go home. But I know my life is supposed to be about more than doing a repetitive job and waiting for a party.
- This sense of lostness can carry on to the next decade. There are the job drifters, never quite settling anywhere, never keeping one job long enough to progress. They worry they will make a mistake about what they are supposed to do with their lives but end up not doing anything for any length of time. There are the philosophical wanderers, drifting from one idea to another, tossed about by intellectual fashion. Sometimes their very intelligence and ability to see other sides of arguments keeps them from ever believing anything firmly. They just can't commit to a worldview and how a definite belief will direct their steps.
- There are ways of wandering that endure to middle age. Some people wander because they always seem controlled by their circumstances. They're feel unable to get a grip. Life happens to them. It seems astounding that so many bad things can happen to one person. They never get an anchor hold against the tide that sweeps them along. They're wandering amidst circumstances that are always undoing them.
- There are those who have wandered from the faith. Once they knew the truth. But they sought greener pastures. They found only parched lands. They sought life in dead places and they are hungry and tired but do not know the way home. Secret sins. Cherished habits. Dashed

expectations. A fervent prayer never answered. A crushing moral failure by someone they looked up to. Or worse, abuse by a spiritual leader. They just can't come home to God after this blow.

The Psalm tells us, *“Then they cried to LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in.”*

Many of us are still wandering. There are also many in this room who can bear witness that the LORD led them home. We have found that there is no greater or deeper truth than the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. It satisfies like nothing else. We need look no further. Many who thought we would never love again have found that God gifted them, beyond hope, with the love of their life. Many have found that God has led us to our life's work, to a place of community and rootedness. We can point to the time, or maybe even the season, when we stopped trying to figure it out ourselves. We cried out to the LORD to guide us and were willing to go wherever he led. We cried out and he delivered us from our distress.

So let us thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of men. For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so!

2) *“Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons, for they had rebelled against the words of God.”* Some have known what it is to receive consequences for our actions. We rebel against God and we do what we want, only to find that we run into a brick wall of consequences:

- We cheat and we get failed in a class or even suspended from school.
- We fudge figures and lose our position.
- We get haunted by the accident we caused while driving drunk.
- We break the law and face trial, fines and prison.
- We disgrace our reputation with our family and community and feel like we have been locked into this disgrace forever.

Those are examples of imprisonment as direct consequences for sin. But this image of living in the shadow of death and being prisoners in irons goes

even farther.

- We all live under the oppression of our mortal frailty. To put it more directly: we fall apart. We end abruptly by accident or violence. We unravel slowly by age or illness. Death has cast its shadow over human life since our first parents sinned.
- Moreover, part of the curse for sin was the grinding difficulty of the work we must do in order to get a living from the stony, thorny ground. Life is hard. Work can feel like a prison sentence even if you are well compensated. So can the routine of endless errands and car pools and activities. We feel locked in.
- We can feel imprisoned in a culture gone mad with people chasing glitter and missing the point. People fall apart, families rip apart, people shout each other apart. We wonder if have gone mad with the idea it's not supposed to be this way. Is there any way out of our collective anger and craziness?

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble and he delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart.

Some here have seen miraculous release from our sentences. Children have been restored to us. Jail cells have literally been opened. Second chances undeserved have put us back in school. Some have found a spiritual freedom while yet living with consequences that will not be removed in this life. Shortly after I arrived here, I received a letter from Jack Wilson. He was a church member then in prison. And deserved to be there. Jack was on our sermon mailing list and he wrote to me. I sent him books at his request. Jack trusted in the Lord. His life was hard and his health precarious-he asked often for prayers. Yet even behind literal bars he learned the inner freedom of forgiveness that only Christ can give. A few years ago, Jack finally finished his sentence and was released. He tasted free air. Ironically, just a few months later, he was released from his physical suffering and went home to be with the Lord, a man forgiven and restored. Those who work in prison ministry, such as the Malachi Dads program at Angola, can bear witness to this. Though the bars will remain in place, meeting Jesus can free the soul in a way that makes the jail bearable.

But more, we sit here as those who have known how the power of

God has shattered doors of bronze and cut in two bars of iron. We have seen the power of God to break what seemed the intractable grip of addictions. We have seen doors open on the mission field. We have seen opportunities for sharing the gospel, or delivering Bibles or even medical supplies when by all rights we should have been stopped. We have seen God make a way when there was no way. When there was no logically way out of the jam, somehow we got out. We yet live. God made the way.

But still more, we have known what it is to have the sentence of death commuted. No, we do not escape the faltering of these mortal frames. But the truth of the resurrection has given us a peace that passes understanding, a hope that the world cannot understand. I heard a story once of a pastor and his family driving in traffic. They pulled up to a traffic stop. Suddenly the light around them faded. Everyone in the car felt chills. A huge truck had pulled up beside them and its shadow had dimmed everything around them. The father said, "Aren't we glad to be under the shadow of that truck and not under the full weight truck itself?" Then he realized the truth in the moment. For us as Christians, death has become a shadow. It casts its pall over us. But the weight of it does not fall on us. We are not crushed, for Christ has burst from his tomb in order to shatter the great doors of death and open the way to life everlasting.

Psalm 107 gives us hope that we're not locked into wandering and futility forever. We don't have to be prisoners of the past. Nor do we need to despair over the future. We're called to cry out to the LORD I Am exactly where we are hurting. And in the process to offer ourselves to him, broken as we are, to go wherever he leads us.

Psalm 107 also reminds us to remember what God has done for us. From giving us life to giving us salvation in Christ to giving us deliverance in present circumstances. We're to offer a sacrifice of praise for his mighty work. It might be as tangible as the gift Parker and Patty made after her accident. It might be the way we intentionally give time to help others going through what we went through. It certainly means the end of anemic, intermittent, optional worship. When we realize what God has done for us, we happily make the sacrifice of energy, focus, effort, time, heart and voice

to give thanks and praise for all he as done.

Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of men! For he shatters the doors of bronze and cuts in two the bars of iron. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so!