

# How Do You Respond to Adversity?

Job 35, Acts 16:22–31

The title of this sermon is a question: How do you respond to adversity? Adversity is defined as *a state of serious or continued difficulty or misfortune*. Everyone experiences difficulties at some point or another. But what about *continued* difficulty—a time in your life when everything seems to go wrong, and nothing seems to improve, no matter how hard you try? I have three points this morning: adversity, worship and witness. First,

## 1. Adversity

Most of us throughout our lives have lived lives relatively free of adversity. We have enjoyed peace and prosperity. God has poured out his blessings upon our land so that we have for the most part led quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty.<sup>1</sup> The Psalmist's prayer for the prosperity of the covenant people has been pretty much realized among us: "That our sons may be as plants grown up in their youth; that our daughters may be as pillars, sculptured in palace style; that our barns may be full, supplying all kinds of produce; that our sheep may bring forth thousands and ten thousands in our fields; that our oxen may be well laden; that there be no breaking in or going out; that there be no outcry in our streets. Happy are the people who are in such a state; happy are the people whose God is the Lord!" (Ps. 144:12–15). We live in generally peaceful neighborhoods where people work out their differences on an individual basis.

But we are realists. We know that we live in a world that is under God's curse. We know that Adam's fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery. We know that adversity cannot be absolutely ruled out.

Years ago, when our children were young, Norma and I experienced a season in our lives when everything seemed to be going wrong. Appliances and vehicles started breaking down; unexpected bills started arriving. Problems were facing us at every turn. We had not been irresponsible in managing our money, it was just that everything seemed to start happening all at once. There did not seem to be a way out. But our problems were nothing in comparison to those experienced by Paul and Silas. Here were men who were in Philippi at the direct call of God. They were preaching in the open air. Their message was the truth of God's word, not ideas of their own making. They were preaching the message of salvation to all who would listen and were not forcing their opinions down anybody's throat. Through the Spirit's regenerating power Lydia had become the first convert on the continent of Europe, and servant girl who followed them around crying out, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation," had been dramatically delivered from the bondage of demon

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Tim. 2:2

possession. But her human traffickers were not at all glad for her deliverance. Their hope of profit was gone, so they seized the two evangelists and dragged them before the magistrates. The men were stripped of their clothing, publicly humiliated and beaten, imprisoned, and thrown into solitary confinement. Denied medical attention, denied visits from other members of their missionary team, their feet were locked into heavy wooden stocks. These servants of Christ, with no other intention than to please God and bring people the knowledge of salvation, were now suffering for the faith.

Surely Paul and Silas were experiencing adversity! What would they do about it? Would they feel sorry for themselves? Would they begin to complain? Would they get mad at God? Would they be tempted to throw in the towel? Would they say, “Oh, boy. I didn’t sign up for this; I quit!” Consider with me point 2,

## **2. Worship**

Paul and Silas did none of these things; rather, their response was to worship. Look at verse 25, “But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.” This is utterly remarkable. Here were men who were being persecuted for their faith, yet their response was *worship!*

Our Shorter Catechism begins with the question, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” The proof text for this catechetical statement would later come from the pen of the apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians: “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Paul’s teaching was that *whatever* we do ought to be done for the glory of God. The Christian, no matter what his calling, must do *all* things for the glory of God. As Paul and Silas languished in solitary confinement, their calling was to glorify God through *suffering*. And since they had no one else to turn to, they turned to God. In the dead of night they began to pray and sing hymns to God.

Perhaps they started to pray the words of Psalm 130, “Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope. My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning. Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” Psalm 130 is one of the “songs of degrees” that were sung by devout pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to keep the great feasts of the Lord; these Psalms were well-known by virtue of their constant use. Furthermore, the opening words, “Out of the depths,” would seem to fit Paul and Silas’s situation exactly. Here were men who

were thrown into the inner prison—down in the depths. There was no chance of escape, and they had no way of knowing how long they would be there. If they were in the depths, it was fitting that they would cry out to the Lord and ask him to hear their voice. How would they know that he had heard them? From Scripture! The Bible promises, “The righteous cry, and the Lord heareth, and delivereth them out of all their troubles” (Ps. 34:10). What a comfort it must have been for Paul and Silas to cry out to the Lord from the depths of their prison, knowing that their Father-God heard them and would use their suffering for his glory! In the middle of the night, unable to sleep because getting into a comfortable position was impossible, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. So it is with men and women who are imprisoned for the gospel in our own day in places like China, India, Laos, Egypt and Nigeria. Being imprisoned is difficult, but Christians pay the price, knowing that the reward is great. Paul and Silas prayed and sang.

Praying and singing are basic elements of Christian worship. Biblical worship is dialogical in form. God speaks to his people through his word, and his people respond in prayer, song and attentive listening. The whole premise of Christian worship is that God is present with his people. He is not aloof, detached, unresponsive. When Elijah challenged the prophets of the false good Baal on Mount Carmel we read that the prophets of Baal “called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon, saying, ‘O Baal, hear us!’ *But there was no voice; no one answered*” (1 Kgs. 18:26). Here is the essence of pagan worship. There is only one living and true God. He is the Creator of everything that is, and the Redeemer of his people. The reason Baal did not answer is because he does not exist. The gods of the pagans are figments of human imagination; they do not exist. The God of heaven says, “They have moved me to jealousy *with that which is not God* (בְּלֹא-אֱלֹהִים); they have provoked me to anger with their vanities” (Deut. 32:21). There is only one God. “I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me” (Isa. 45:5). Many people think that one religion is as good as another; men of good will pray to God as they understand him; one man will get to God one way, and another another way, but in the end, everyone will finally get to God. But that is a lie! There is only one living and true God. “The gods of the people are idols: but the LORD made the heavens” (1 Chron. 16:26). Moreover, the only way to approach the living and true God is through Christ. “There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:15). “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). You may think that you can pray to God as you understand him, and that you can come to him some other way than through Jesus Christ, but you would be wrong, and no matter how sincere you might be, you would be sincerely wrong. Only the true God can save, and he saves only those who come to him through Christ. There is no other way of salvation.

Christianity claims to be the exclusive way to God, and a lot of people are offended by that. “It doesn’t seem fair,” they say—and it may not seem fair to man, but in the end, what matters is not man’s opinion but God’s truth. Do you want to go to heaven? Then you must go through Christ. There is no other way. I would not be a faithful minister if I told you otherwise. Some say, “Surely God would not exclude the Hindu or the Buddhist or the Muslim or the Jew who try to come to him apart from Christ!” Yes, he will, and you can disagree all you want, but if you disagree, you will be excluded from Christ through all eternity. May the Spirit of God enlighten our darkened minds to understand and exclaim with the people of Elijah’s time, “The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!” (1 Kgs. 18:39).

Paul and Silas from the bowel of the prison were praying “to *God*,” and the Lord heard them. Perhaps they would say, echoing Peter and the other apostles in Acts 5, something along the lines of “Lord, thank you that we have been counted worthy to suffer shame for your name.” The Christian’s calling is to suffer, and those who suffer for the sake of Christ will by no means lose their reward. Sitting with their feet in stocks, their backs having been torn open by repeated blows, they could derive comfort by nothing else than by having suffered for Christ.

It is in the furnace of adversity that the Christian learns to pray. When things are going well, we tend to become complacent and grow lax in prayer. But when we reach the limit of our own human endurance and call out to God, we find that he comes through for us.

God wants us to pray, not only in church, but at other times as well. His word says, “Rejoice evermore. *Pray* without ceasing. In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thess. 5:16–18).

But Paul and Silas not only prayed, they also sang hymns. And once again we see that their hymns as well as their prayers were directed “to God.” A hymn (ὕμνος) was a song of praise in honor of a divinity.<sup>2</sup> In Christian usage it is a song of praise in honor of the true God. Twice in the New Testament we are commanded to sing hymns: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and *hymns* and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16); and “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and *hymns* and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19). Where are Christians to learn hymns? Why, in the worship of the church! Trained by years of having sung hymns in public worship with the people of God, the words of edifying and biblically faithful hymns are etched in peoples’ minds and hearts, ready to be called up and repeated in time of need. This is why it is so important to sing with the congregation, not only because God is not at all impressed with our just going through the motions of worship, while our

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<sup>2</sup> Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, ὕμνος, ὑμνέω (Logos Bible Software)

minds and hearts are far from him, but also because singing with the congregation is good training for times of personal reflection and growth, for times of persecution, and also for heaven. We are told that in heaven the saints will sing a new song to God day and night. Why do some people refuse to join in the congregational singing? Either because it is not in their heart to do it, or more broadly, because singing itself has fallen on hard times. Back in the days before electronics families would sing together both to amuse themselves and to pass on important family values to the next generation. But the ubiquity of streaming song services has transformed singing into entertainment, where people sit back and listen to a particularly gifted person sing, while the audience is passive—and we are all the poorer. Think of sea chanties and rowing songs, drinking songs and folk music, as well as gathering around the table to sing during family worship, where in earlier times whole communities gave expression to their thoughts and transmitted their common values for others to hear and remember.

Let me be blunt: if you do *not* sing to the Lord, you are sinning. If you do not *want* to sing to the Lord, then there is something wrong with your priorities. God does not have first place in your life; you need to reckon with that and ask God to give you a desire to sing. You cannot simply say, “I don’t have a good voice; I pray thee, have me excused.” All of us can learn to extend the vowels and sound out the rhythm of words. Seven times in the Bible we are told to make a “joyful noise” to God. Even monotones can do that!

God never intended public worship to devolve into a concert, where the worship band predominates and people just listen to the singing of the semi-professionals. I remember a woman writing in *New Horizons* recently that the first time she ever visited an Orthodox Presbyterian Church she was taken aback by the congregational singing: here were people who were singing like they *meant* it—like they really believed what they were singing about! Oh, that every congregation of God’s people would learn the joys of congregational singing. Our Lord himself is the example for this; twice we are told that after the Last Supper, “when they had *sung an hymn*, they went out into the mount of Olives.”<sup>3</sup> Imagine men coming together to learn of Christ, singing together, and departing with a song on their lips. People in our day might say, “What’s wrong with you?” but never mind; *God* is the one who is pleased. *He* is our audience in worship. We have considered two points: *adversity* and *worship*. Thirdly, consider

### **3. Witness**

There is nothing in our passage to suggest that Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns to the Lord simply to put on a show for the other prisoners. Remember, they had been cast into the *inner* prison. The word in the original for “inner” is *esoteric*.

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<sup>3</sup> Matt. 26:30, Mark 14:26

In English this means knowledge designed for the initiated alone, knowledge that is restricted to a small group. *Inner* is the comparative of “in,” meaning something like “*more in.*” In the cell where Paul and Silas were confined there was no way out. The inner prison would have had no outside walls, no air circulation, and probably a single solid door whose purpose was to prevent the poor hapless inmate from escaping. How could Paul and Silas have known that their prayers and songs could even be heard? But the other inmates at the prison had something special that night, something they had not anticipated, something they had not planned on, something that the Bible calls the “pearl of great price”—the most valuable commodity in the entire world—and that is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, the good news that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” for our justification (1 Cor. 15).

I’m sure many of the prisoners in that Roman prison spent long, cheerless days shut up, away from family and friends, not knowing if they would ever get out. Doubtless, many of them were from pagan, Roman backgrounds. They believed the fanciful stories of the fickle Roman gods. They had never heard about the true God. Yet tonight there were a couple new prisoners who had offended the town bigwigs—the movers and shakers—and had gotten thrown into prison. In their time of confinement they had heard many new prisoners assert their innocence. But they had grown cynical: “That’s what they all say; don’t believe a word of it.” But word had traveled around the prison concerning Paul and Silas’s mistreatment, and now they were hearing them pray and sing to God, and they were impressed. Who *were* these men? What was their angle? Could this be for real? They had never before heard prisoners sing joyfully to God after all these men had been through.

Our text records that “at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.” The word for “prisoners” indicates that these men were in *bonds*. Their movements were severely restricted. They were hopeless. They were not going anywhere unless the magistrate ordered their release. But now they were hearing the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ! This is the gospel of the Messiah revealed in Isaiah 61 who says, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, *to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.*” Is this not good news to those who are in prison?

The Bible makes clear that before we came to Christ, we were all prisoners of the devil. Now that we are converted we are to pray for others not yet delivered, “that they may come to their senses and escape the *snare* of the devil, having been taken *captive* by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:26).

There were a lot of prisoners in Philippi. Many—perhaps all of them—were guilty, having committed crimes worthy of imprisonment. But Paul and Silas were thrown into the mix, and everybody benefitted, for they all heard the gospel. Maybe some were saved on the spot; with others, a seed had been planted; but in the case of all, it was the Father's will that his truth would be lifted up in the suffering of his servants Paul and Silas. This was all part of God's perfect plan to plant a thriving church in Philippi.

How can we learn to respond appropriately to adversity? How can we learn to pray and sing hymns, rather than curse and complain? It is not easy, but let me make a few suggestions. First, commit yourself to it. You won't change unless you *desire* change. Second: know the teaching of Scripture concerning God's sovereignty—whatever happens in the life is inscrutably a part of his perfect plan which cannot be improved upon. He is always working out his perfect plan. "Known to God from eternity are all His works" (Acts 15:18). He is in control of all things. He is never taken off guard. Nothing can thwart his plan. Third: follow the example of the apostles. Fourth: pray for grace. Fifth: realize that you will be better for it: whatever evil he brings into your life is ultimately for his glory and your good. When you get to heaven you will understand perfectly.

Here, then, are the difficulty: *adversity*, the response: *worship*; and the blessing: *witness*. Let us pray that God will glorify himself in us, as he glorified himself in Paul and Silas. Amen.