

PRISON BREAK

PSALM 107:1-3, 10-16 OCTOBER 2, 2016

In 2010 Jacob, Alex and I were on a short mission to Chile and Peru and toward the end of the trip some Christians from a local Calvary Chapel brought us along to be a part of their outreach to Lurigancho prison in Lima. After our visit we learned that National Geographic had recently aired a documentary on the world's 3 toughest prisons, listing (as I recall) Lurigancho as number 2.

It was an experience that stands alone in my mind. Of the many thoughts and images that I remember about that day, two rise to the top. The first is that I remember walking into one of the buildings, where many men lived and it also served for a place for some of the Christians there to hold a little church service. And entering in, the smell was putrid and rotten. I remember thinking to myself, "This is what *death* smells like." And second, I remember the gnawing thought of how awful it would be to have to stay at this prison. That thought was present in our minds because we had to surrender our passports in order to go inside the prison walls. In exchange, we each were given a little brass coin, which was our ticket out. It was explained very clearly to us that, without that coin, we would not be allowed to exit. At the end of our visit, it was a relief to be able to walk back through the gates as free men, not confined to such an awful place.

Psalm 107 is going to take all of us into a prison cell today. It's a prison much worse than Lurigancho or Alcatraz or Sing Sing. It's the prison of sin that once laid claim to your life and your future. Or perhaps it still does (you just may not know it). But this text won't leave us in that cell. No, Psalm 107 is a beautiful song of *rescue*. It describes and celebrates the work that God has done to save human beings from their guilt, if they are willing to call out to Him.

The Psalm opens up in verse 1 and says this:

**Psalm 107:1-3 - ¹Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for *He is good!* For His mercy *endures forever.*
²Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, Whom He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy,
³And gathered out of the lands, From the east and from the west, From the north and from the south.**

This song is a call to all those who have been saved to *think* about what it means to be redeemed and then to publicly praise God for who He is and what He has done. And to help us understand all this, the Psalmist gives us 4 different portraits that delve into what redemption is. Redemption is portrayed seeing the rescue of refugees who were lost in the wilderness. It's portrayed as we see diseased men, about to die, healed of their sickness and restored to life. It's portrayed as we see sailors in a terrible storm at sea, rescued by God, who calms the wind and the waves. And redemption is portrayed as we see captives in the worst of prisons, broken out by the power of God.

That is the portrait we want to spend our time on this morning. For at least 3 reasons: First, because God wants us to *understand* salvation and *understand* His lovingkindness. This Psalm ends by saying that if you are wise, you will observe and study the compassion of God, and begin to understand it, guarding that understanding like a treasure in your heart. A second reason to look at this passage is that if we have been redeemed, then we should say so. To be saved means we have been delivered from the greatest of dangers, rescued from the greatest of enemies and that is a message that must not be kept silent, but is to be broadcast *publicly* to whoever will listen. And third, we want to study this portrait of redemption today in case there is someone here who is still a prisoner of sin. If you are here and have not put your faith in Christ and made Jesus King of your life,

you are headed toward death, still guilty of your sin. And that will require that you be judged and sent into a Christless eternity in what the Bible calls the Lake of Fire. But today, Psalm 107 declares and explains that there is a *Rescuer*, who has gone to incredible lengths to save you and give you life. If you will call out to Him for help and mercy.

We begin our story in verse 10, peering into the gloom of a prison cell.

Psalm 107:10 - ¹⁰Those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, Bound in affliction and irons—

We'll find out their crime in a moment, but for now, let's look at these prisoners. It says that they are 'bound'. That word is defined as "a person who is confined; especially in regard to crimes or as a prisoner of war."

This is no 24 hour hold. The person we're looking at here is not just in the drunk tank for the night. It says they 'sat' in darkness. That is a term that means, "to be settled" or, "to establish a dwelling." The trial is over, the sentence has been decreed and now, this chamber has become their reality. And it is a bleak and terrifying reality to be sure. These prisoners find themselves not only guilty, but imprisoned. Not only are they in prison, but they are locked in a cell. No playtime in the yard for them. No work release. No privileges for good behavior. Not only are they in a locked cell, but they are also bound with chains. So they're tied up, in a cell, in a prison, convicted with no possibility of appeal or parole.

And then, there's the ominous revelation that they are not alone in their cell. They sit in the *shadow* of death. Meaning that Death himself is standing between them and any light that tries to get in. Day and night he stands watch, towering over these prisoners, blocking them from any hope of escape. He's just waiting out the days till he can claim them for himself.

Now, remember - this isn't just supposed to be a scary story. This Psalm is a study in just *how* powerful is the mercy of God. The *lengths* that God will go to give mercy to the people of the earth. *Where* He will go to rescue them. *What* He can do to deliver. And so, we are meant to put ourselves in that cell, bound by those chains, and experience a glimpse of the terror that is a life apart from God. A life enslaved to sin and held captive by the devil. The reality of this Psalm is that *this* is *exactly* the condition of every person on the planet unless and until they are saved by Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures declare that we are all trapped and bound, prisoners of sin, sentenced to death.

Now, perhaps at this point you're thinking: "I don't deserve to be on death row like the people in this story." Well, let's find out why exactly they are there. What was their crime?

Psalm 107:11 - ¹¹Because they rebelled against the words of God, And despised the counsel of the Most High,

These prisoners were there for the highest crime of all: Treason against the throne of God Most High. Treason is something that effectively all cultures in all eras recognize as unacceptable and largely unforgivable. Really, it's an offense that is in a category all its own.

Here, the Psalmist takes us out of the context of just our local city or our state or even our nation, and takes us to the *highest* court, where we see the Highest King, who deserves the highest praise,

but instead, He received from the people in our story *not* worship and obedience, but rebellion and scorn. The language says that they *provoked* the Lord and His Word. God, as King, had shared not only His commandments, but also His counsel with them. Meaning that God had given the people of earth direction and purpose and a course of action for their lives, but they despised the Lord and they rose up in rebellion with the *ultimate* hope of dethroning the King and crowning themselves as rulers over their own lives.

This is not the description of a few anarchists, this is the verdict of every single man, woman and child who has ever lived. The Bible explains that all of us, like sheep, have gone astray, leaving God's path to follow our own. There is none righteous, *no not one*, none who does good. *We* are the rebels, guilty of treason before a holy and perfect God.

Treason is the highest crime a person can commit against a state or a kingdom. And that is why the people in our text find themselves in their prison cells, shackled in the dark, guarded by death. And they are absolutely guilty, not of just one mistake made in haste, it's not a youthful error, but a repeated campaign of rebellion against the Most High King.

Taking a look at this scene we might wonder why these prisoners are allowed to live at all and weren't executed on the spot?

Psalm 107:12 - ¹²Therefore He brought down their heart with labor; They fell down, and *there was none to help.*

I think that, even here, we can see God's incredible mercy and grace on display. These traitors deserved death, even by human reckoning, but instead, the King allows them to live that they may be humbled. Their problem had been rooted in pride. In pride they rose up, wanting to set up their own kingdoms. But their rebellion had been overcome and now the Lord will bring them down to see who they really are and what the consequences of their rejection of Him would be. Because, in the end, God does not *want* them to perish, but to be saved and to be bought back and *brought* back from what they have done.

Psalm 107:13 - ¹³Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, *And He saved them out of their distresses.*

Now this is a remarkable verse! First, we see something beautiful and incredible happen in the hearts of the prisoners: They call out to the Lord. They ask for mercy from the very King that they had warred against. It is the height of humility contrasted with the height of their arrogance a few verses ago. This is a powerful example of what Solomon said in Proverbs 3, verse 34:

Proverbs 3:34 - ³⁴Surely He scorns the scornful, But gives grace to the humble.

Humility is the way to spiritual growth. Humility is something that gets God's attention in a considerable way. But even *more* remarkable than the humility of the prisoners is the response of the King. He *saves* those who deserve no saving. In fact, when it says that He 'saved' them, it means He went and *rescued* them. What kind of King fights to save people who tried to take His throne? Only our God is a God like that. Only the God of the Bible has this kind of character of mercy and grace.

Look at verse 14:

Psalm 107:14 - ¹⁴He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, And broke their chains in pieces.

Let's also read verse 16:

Psalm 107:16 - ¹⁶For He has broken the gates of bronze, And cut the bars of iron in two.

Notice: This isn't a *pardon*, it's a *prison break*! The Lord didn't just put a phone call in to the warden to have these guys released. He didn't go and *unlock* their chains or the bars or the gates - He *broke* them!

When we think of rescue missions, often we think of the innocent person lost somewhere and a group coming together to find them. We think of the hiker in the mountains. People arm in arm combing mile after mile to save the unfortunate. It's a noble, inspiring thing to see. But a *prison break* is scandalous! We may even be able to understand someone being willing to do it in order to save an *innocent* person, but the people in our text who are being busted out are by no means innocent. They're absolutely guilty, against the very Person who broke in to rescue them!

And, if we follow this picture, we see that God had to come not just through gates and bars, not just into darkness, but *through* death in order to rescue mankind. In order to save you and me, God Himself had to leave His throne and come down into our reality, into darkness, through death, so that we could be saved *from* death and given a new life. And the Lord did so with unreserved intensity. He poured out all, took all of our sin upon Himself, died as our Substitute to redeem us.

When it says He 'broke their chains' the word means that He ripped them off forcefully. When it says that He 'broke the gates' a different word is used: It's a word that means, 'destroyed' and crushed. When He cut the bars, it means they were sheared and smashed, that they 'no longer existed.'

You know what that means? That means that these redeemed prisoners could *never go back* to this prison. The prison was destroyed. They were rescued not only from their *past* rebellions, but from their future imperfections as well. As Paul said, "There is therefore now *no* condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." Our King came into the dark, through death, to save the guilty and set us free. That's what redemption means. You and I are the treasonous rebels. We're the ones who were under Death's lock and key. But Christ came to redeem us and anyone else who will call on His name. In the Epistles we read:

2 Timothy 1:10 - ¹⁰ And now he has made all of this plain to us by the appearing of Christ Jesus, our Savior. He broke the power of death and illuminated the way to life and immortality through the Good News.

Hebrews 2:14b-15 - that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

That is the work of God and the power of God, given for us. This is a glimpse into the incredible depths of redemption. Realizing this or reminding ourselves of it again should lead to the same response every time:

Psalm 107:15 - ¹⁵Oh, that *men* would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, And for His wonderful works to the children of men!

This line is repeated four times in this Psalm. The writer is calling us to not only consider these things, but to *celebrate* them. To do so publicly, with passion and thanksgiving. This is not meant to be some trite lip-service for some generic 'goodness', but a time of urgent, public praise to the Lord for the wonderful, *personal* work God has done for you and for me. When we think about what God has done to redeem us from our own guilt and sin, would we not consider it treason to fail to thank Him and tell others what He has done?

In 1974 Yankees owner George Steinbrenner was indicted on 14 criminal counts in connection with Richard Nixon's reelection campaign. He pleaded guilty to both illegal contributions and obstruction of justice. Though he was given no jail time (only a fine), Ronald Reagan would later grant Steinbrenner a pardon for these offenses in the closing days of his second term.¹

Steinbrenner's response? "I am very grateful to President Reagan for his confidence in me," he said. "I will be certain to try and not let him down."² Hardly a statement worthy of the grace he had received. I hope I would've tried to say something a bit more meaningful for such a gift.

And then the Psalmist takes me by the hand and brings me back to the rubble where my prison once stood and explains that God poured out a *costly* mercy so that He could rescue me from my own guilt and the penalty of my sins and change me from being a separatist and subverter into a servant and a son. *That's* the goodness this song is talking about. And that's a goodness worth talking about today. To God be the glory, *great things* He has done!

As we close, maybe you're here today and you're not one of the redeemed - meaning you have never been born again. You've never made the choice to believe in Jesus Christ and accept Him as King and Substitute in your life. If that is you, then you're still a prisoner in the cell of sin. And death is waiting right now to claim you forever. There is no rescue, there is no escape other than by Jesus Christ. But if you want to be saved from your sin, it's very simple: This Psalm has 4 stories of rescue, when people were at the very end of their road. And every time, when they called out to God for mercy, He came and rescued them. Because He is a God of mercy and grace. And what we must do to be saved is explained very clearly in Romans chapter 10. There it says:

Romans 10:9-10 - if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

Are you still in your cell? Call out to God. Ask Him to save you. He can and will redeem you from the hand of death, from the power of sin. He will redeem you and give you a new life, a new hope, a new reality. And He will do it today if you believe and confess.

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2009/LIVING/wayoflife/01/05/mf.presidential.pardons/index.html?ref=24hours>

² <http://www.nydailynews.com/sports/baseball/yankees/george-steinbrenner-pardoned-ronald-reagan-article-1.2478639>