

[prisoner of lord]

:: hebrews 13.3 ::

We're all given a choice today. The choice is: Will we allow our loving God to do what He wants to do in our lives, or are we going to avoid Him? Are we willing to let God have His way and His will in our situations and schedules, or are we glad to settle for knowing that He exists and that there's a heaven waiting for us after we die?

The choice is ours to make. Because our Savior desires nearness with us day by day. And His desire is that our lives actually be filled with Himself.

I was struck a few weeks ago by a verse I read in Hebrews. It's Hebrews 13.3, which reads:

Hebrews 13.3 - Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also.

Just about every week we read about fellow believers who are imprisoned in other parts of the world, something I can hardly fathom. And here, we're commanded to think about them and pray with them, to set our minds as if we were chained with them for the sake of the Gospel.

And I kept thinking about the persecution that Christians face. It's a terrible thing that believers elsewhere in the world are persecuted and suffer severe pains and injustice. From my position of comfort and security, I sometimes wonder why God allows those things to happen to His people. Why we aren't protected from that suffering.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that being a prisoner is a big theme in the Bible. It's really more expected than the life we live here in the West. Because, throughout both the Old and the New Testaments we see a lot of God's people taken captive and placed in a prison, for one reason or another. And Jesus explained that the world was going to respond negatively to Believers and the work that God does through them. It's guaranteed.

But, Biblically speaking, there's more than just the reality of our world and it's hatred of Christianity. There's more here for us to understand. The Bible shows us that God can do great things through the imprisonment of His people. As we see their examples, whether they were taken captive as a result of their own decisions or if they were innocent and put up in the prison, God comes to them and speaks to them and does something in their hearts and through their lives. Really incredible things. That's what we see on the pages of Scripture and we see that work continuing today.

I read a story yesterday of a lady named Esther Ahn Kim. She was a Korean Christian who lived during WWII. When Japan occupied her country, she realized that she was going to eventually be incarcerated for her faith. She wasn't going to bow down to the shrines that were being set up all around her neighborhood and country by the Japanese army.

Since she knew it was a matter of time before she was behind bars, she determined to prepare herself for it. She started eating a diet of rotten food, since that's what she'd be eating in jail. She memorized over a hundred chapters of the Bible since she wouldn't be able to keep one with her. She committed many hymns to memory so she would be able to sing to the Lord. She fasted and prayed and consecrated herself for what was coming ahead. Because if that was the road that God set before her, she was going to be faithful to Him.

Sure enough, she was eventually arrested and sent to prison. She was there from 1939 till 1945. While inside, she was able to minister to other inmates, who went from thieves and murderers to believers in Jesus Christ. Because of how God used this one woman, eternity is fuller with those who previously had no hope. Because God allowed that suffering, eternities were changed and Esther was purified and transformed in an incredible way.

Now, that's a pretty amazing and inspiring story. It's true, but it's not exactly common to us in the time and place we live.

So how do we apply this sort of thinking to our own lives? That's what we're looking for. If God has spoken in His word through these various examples of imprisoned people, how is my life supposed to be changed by it? Or are they just interesting stories?

Paul believed that they weren't just stories, but that they were more than that.

If we start thinking about Paul's various imprisonments and how he talked about them in his letters we'll get some insight into what this theme means for us. Most famously, there are 2 passages we can focus on. First, Ephesians 4.1:

Ephesians 4.1 - I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.

And then, 2 Timothy 1.8:

2 Timothy 1.8 - Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God.

Paul believed that his imprisonment was a result of God's will and His plan for Paul's life. That was the road God had set before him. The chains that bound him weren't Roman, they were the accessories of the life and ministry that God had called him to. And he explains to us that we should conduct ourselves, in one sense, as if we were prisoners of God and that we should embrace the sufferings of Christ for our own benefit and the furtherance of the Gospel.

These are very strange thoughts.

Throughout the Scriptures it is made very clear that God is in control of every circumstance in our lives. And, it's also made clear that God purposefully places His people in specific locations at specific times with specific gifts and opportunities so that He might glorify Himself and minister to the people of earth. But those places and opportunities aren't always pleasant.

A good example is Ester chapter 4:

Esther 4.14 - For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

The deal is that God wants to do something special and unique through each of our lives. He is not *dependent* on us. He can do whatever He wants. However, His *desire* is to scatter Believers throughout time in order to accomplish His will through them. But it requires a willing sacrifice on our part and a willingness to share in the suffering of Christ.

Philippians 3.8-11 - Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

That's the Christian life.

We need to start seeing our lives as Paul did. As prisoners of the Lord. Captive to His will and His plan. We should be Psalm 23 Christians, who are confident in God's leading in our lives whether we're in a green pasture or in the valley of the shadow of death.

What happens though is that we sometimes find ourselves in some situation that is *not* comfortable and our first thought is to escape it. Whether it's a trial or a storm or a difficult relationship or whatever else, we get to the place God has brought us and, if we don't like it, we immediately start looking for a way to tunnel out so we don't have to deal anymore.

But Biblical Christianity isn't about the pursuit of wealth and comfort and stability. Not at all. It's about the pursuit of God. And God has explained to us that suffering is going to be a part of the work He wants to do in us.

2 Timothy 3.12 - Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

We need to understand that we have a natural bent to try to escape these parts of our relationship God. We immediately want to escape struggle or difficulty or discomfort. But those things are the normal byproduct of Godly living. And, on top of that, God allows those things so that He can accomplish His will in us in incredible ways. So we can be purified and glorified and illuminated.

So what we're going to do for the next few weeks is take a few passages where God's people were imprisoned and see what the Lord said to them and did through them. I want us to take a look at how God magnified Himself through that suffering and how He shined through their lives.

Because we need to understand that God has a will and a plan for our lives and we need to be captivated in Him. We should see our situations and circumstances as belonging to Him so that we're not always trying to find the most comfortable, frictionless life. True Christianity includes suffering and persecution from the world. If we never experience trial or persecution, then either we're hiding our faith away from those around us or we're constantly trying to escape the conformation of God.

And God has said that some of what He wants to do in us cannot be done outside the house of suffering. That is the path to a life of real value and real transformation and real Godliness.

2 Corinthians 1.7 - And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation.

We want what God wants. But we need to submit ourselves to it. As we see a few examples of prisoners of Lord, I believe we will be brought nearer to God and more influenced by His Holy Spirit.

Romans 8.18 - For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.