

God's Presence in Joy

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[0 : 00] Hi everyone, what a great introduction. Yes, it is a story about joy and it's about a reason to rejoice, though it probably doesn't look at it at the beginning. Here's these two people who have had their livelihood taken away from them and gone to the local magistrates and it starts with a magistrate who didn't clearly quite grasp the gospel message of love, peace and forgiveness and grace. Instead, he ordered Paul and Silas to be stripped, flogged, thrown into prison and not just that, not just that, he deemed them to be such a threat and their gospel message so subversive that the jailer was ordered to guard them carefully. The jailer, keenly zealous to do his job and who can blame him, put them in an inner cell and fastened them in stocks and chains. This was category A high security. These men were deemed dangerous. Let's just pause there a minute in this story. What would we do in Paul and Silas's position if we can even imagine such a scenario? We are wrongly accused, we are humiliated, we are stripped naked, we are flogged, we are thrown into a dark cell with our injuries. What would be our initial inclination?

Of course, here we go. We bring out, we sing a few choruses of mission praise, don't we? Some of our favourite hymns. My goodness, the joy of the Lord and maybe a few and maybe that helps stop the bleeding and the pain from the flogging and soothe the bruises along with that excruciating pain of being shackled. Maybe even the rats might join in. Hallelujah.

But wait, don't forget, this is a series on the supernatural presence and power of God. And that's exactly what Paul and Silas were about to encounter and all the people around them. Praying, singing so much that the other prisoners couldn't help but hear and listen to them and their message of hope and joy in what appeared to be a desperate situation. How counter-cultural is that for you and I?

I don't know about you, often when I'm in the depths of things, I just want to have a really good moan. You know, how counter-cultural is this story of the gospel?

Then, if that isn't supernatural enough for you, here comes the earthquake. Not just a run-of-the-mill earthquake. No, the very foundations of the prison were shaken and were moved.

[3 : 10] Now, I've heard some singing in my time, but that would probably have shattered a few windows, but nothing enough to have actually caused this for the doors of the prison to fly open around me.

So powerful was it, supernatural, because prison doors, if you know, are not meant to fling open. Believe me, I know. If that wasn't enough, not just the doors, then on top of that, the added bit is the prisoners' chains come loose.

Bingo! We are free. How many of us may not have had sympathy with the jailer? Come on, let's be honest, but let's consider him in this supernatural move of God in this story.

Now, we don't know whether the jailer was on a minimum wage, fixed term, or zero hours contract. We're not told, but we are told, clearly from the history of his employers, it wasn't going to be a really great tribunal afterwards.

It was better to actually get at his sword and kill himself. Don't try that, please. It's never that desperate. But this is, he was about to kill himself, and Paul brought some joy into what is a desperate situation, and shouted in the dark, don't harm yourself, we are all here.

[4 : 45] That is quite amazing, isn't it, really? Probably gathering everybody, he thought, for another choir practice. Now, for escaping prisoners, the scenario goes something like this.

Doors open, prisoners run out, kill the guards on the way if he hasn't already done it himself. That's the way it normally works. But this God, this is God, supernaturally moving in power to use the situation to bring somebody to know him in amazing joy.

The jailer gets some lights. Presumably, there were still others who had joined him, just as confused and as amazed that they were still alive.

He rushes in, presumably stepping over doors, falling before Paul and Silas, and he then brings them out and asks, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

Is that where the presence of joy began in the reality of his life? I'm still alive. I'm not dead. This is amazing.

[6 : 01] I have seen God at work. What is all this about? And here are these people. I'm alive. I've just witnessed an extraordinary and totally opposite thing to how things should normally work out.

What is this all about? No wonder he asked, what must I do to be saved? His whole world has changed. I don't know whether you've ever witnessed something similar.

Maybe somebody who has been snatched from the jaws of death. Maybe a person rescued. Maybe a person who has been airlifted to safety from a sinking boat.

A person who has encountered the supernatural power of God in their life that is so life-changing.

A person who is asking the question and giving thanks for being saved.

[7 : 02] This is a miraculous story. There is pain. There is distress. Yet there is deep joy in the jailer's life.

What do I do to be saved? Paul and Silas, believe in the Lord and you will be saved. You and your whole household.

Powerful. Powerful words. Imagine the joy in this household. What should have been awake is now turned into a celebration.

They were baptized. No lengthy baptism course. There and then, as it happened, instantaneous, responding to God's goodness.

They knew the power and presence of God in their midst. They had seen it. They had witnessed it. And that's what made it so exciting. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

[7 : 59] Have you witnessed that joy of people being saved? Who have been saved? Do you remember that realization and joy? Maybe in your own life of when that moment happened for you.

That joy that you had realized at that moment that God is alive and is on your case. Supernaturally and powerfully.

And maybe being in joy. This isn't about being happy. The joy we experience as a Christian is far, far, far, far more.

You see, in the presence of God we have the joy because we have been saved. That's probably why I find the term happy-clappy so offensive, so shallow and so ignorant.

I do. I'm really sorry. Because this isn't just being happy. The joy of the Lord is far, far, far, far more. That in the situation makes us praise and worship God.

[9 : 05] Supernatural, life-giving joy. One of my favorite stories in the Bible is Nehemiah. And Nehemiah is taken from what is quite a cozy job and is given a job to go and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

He faces opposition. He faces hate. He faces lies. And yet, the walls are rebuilt. And he sees a whole people, a whole community return to God.

And as it says, then he said to them, Go eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared.

For this day is holy to the Lord. This is a special day for you. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

Sing a joyful song unto the Lord. Why? Because you and I, through the cross of Jesus, we know and we believe, who have accepted and acknowledged Jesus, are saved.

[10 : 18] We have eternal life through the blood and sacrifice of Jesus, which we're going to share in a minute in our communion. There's more than a few worship songs.

There's more than a few raised arms. This is life. Life everlasting. Joy in all its fullness. In whatever stage of life we are.

And whatever we face. What is the church known for? If you had to draw up a list of ten things, would joy be the top of your list?

Because I hope it would be. Because people need to know. See, like Paul, the world is experiencing darkness, economic instability, wars, threats of wars, a lack of trust, social injustice with poverty on our doorstep.

Many people don't know where to turn to at the moment. They're asking. There is something more. There must be more. What is real? What is truth? What is tangible?

[11 : 22] What brings hope? What brings freedom? What brings a sense of joy? And we have the answer. Why aren't we telling people? Why aren't we sharing that joy more and more with people?

We know, as Paul and Silas did, that comes through the Lord living in us and working in us and through us. Bringing freedom. Freedom to the captives which tries to bind us.

I have to tell you, the devil is a great deceiver. Halloween, I heard it this week, Halloween is a harmless eccentricity.

You know, dress your kids up in horror costumes is just a bit of fun. Lie. Lie. The devil will tell you that there's no hope and no solutions in your situation that you face.

It's a lie. The Bible is no longer the true and authoritative word of God. Lie. Because it is. People won't accept your invite to come and explore the Christian faith.

[12 : 32] Lie. Lie. They will. Because they'll see something in us that they want. Yet the door of your life that binds you today, whatever that might be, whatever it is, if you're listening on the podcast, whatever that is that lies have been spoken into your life can come flying off their hinges when the supernatural joy of the Lord breaks in and frees us.

The joy of the Lord is our strength. It can shake the foundations of our bondage and free us and the joy of us stepping into a new freedom.

Maybe we need to live more like a people who have found that joy in our lives. And people will say, do you know what? I want some of that. I want what you've got. I can see that.

I want to experience that in whatever situation. Where do I get it? Where do I find it? I've experienced through Alpha so many people, especially young people, have come to know Jesus and I recall very, very much certain people in your life that touch your life with joy.

And one was a guy called James Bennett. James Bennett was in his mid-teens. James Bennett, wherever you saw him, would be on his roller skates, on his skates, skating around the town.

[14 : 02] He was a huge advocate for the gospel. Just the joy just flowed out of him. James died very, very suddenly and unexpectedly in his bedroom.

His funeral was here. I remember that day. Church was absolutely packed to overflowing with his friends and all of us who had been impacted by the joy that he had shared in his life.

It was a joyful celebration amidst the sadness. Most of his friends said in a book that they wrote at Clevedon School, I have known Jesus because I know James.

What a great testimony for us all in our lives that people will say to us, actually, I've seen the joy in your life and that is what has joined me to Jesus.

It says, By the power of the Holy Spirit.

[15 : 29] That's what we get sent out with into our everyday this week. The jailer knew this wasn't the end. He knew it was the beginning. That was his joy. A whole new life.

Born again. Freedom. Have you asked for joy? Like that in your life? Have you asked? I'm going to end with a personal story.

There are times and moments when God takes you to a place to restore that joy in your life. I didn't know what had stolen some joy from my life.

It was certainly diminished. But I ended up at Lee Abbey. If you know Lee Abbey? On the beach. Just doing stones.

Which is just throwing stones in like they do skimming across. Which is what my dad and I always used to do. My dad had died seven years before. And there was something I knew.

[16 : 28] Something that was missing in my life. I went back up. I was early. I just arrived. Went back up. And everybody's very polite, don't they?

Everybody's new. They all meet for tea. And we all stand around having a cup of tea. Which is very nice. But I sensed the Lord as I walked back up saying, This is where it ends. Just those words. This is where it ends, Clive. This is where it ends. Two people who had just travelled down from Birmingham. And they travelled down from Birmingham. And they came to pray for everybody that week.

And as we were having tea, they were very bold. And they stood up and said, As we were praying on the way down, We just got these words for somebody. I don't know whether it means anything to anybody. But this is where it ends.

I thought, hmm. Bit of a clue there, God. I might get that one. I know I'm thick. But I'd just get that one. It's okay. So you sort of sidle up behind somebody and say, I think that's me.

[17 : 31] Can we pray together? I met with them in the evening. And they had this wonderful way of praying with people. They said, We're just going to be still and silent and see what the Lord says. Come Holy Spirit.

And whereupon, she starts scribbling on this notepad that she had. I thought, this is good. It's almost like the Ten Commandments again. She's really going for it. There's anything.

That just wouldn't stop. It's going through. And then she paused and she said, What do you think? What do you think your bereavement has stolen from your life?

And I said, joy. Joy. Joy. And she'd written on two full-scop sheets, joy, joy, joy, joy, again and again.

And they prayed. And we restored the joy that had been stolen from them. The joy of the Lord is our strength. I'd encourage you today.

[18 : 31] Whatever you feel that zeal or that joy that you may have experienced maybe years ago has been taken from you, that it is there for you today.

The Lord is ready. There may be an earthquake. It may not be an earthquake. But whatever the doors are, I pray that the doors would fling open. The chains of whatever has bound us with that would be free.

And that the Lord would bring supernaturally, which is what this series is all about, would bring that joy into our lives. Again, please ask.

Ask and it will be given. That's what we're about today. And enabling to be filled with that joy, we can share that with a waiting world.

Should we do that? Let's pray. Music team are going to come up. And we're going to move into a time of prayer. Holy Spirit, would you come? Lord, would you identify to us those places where our joy has been diminished?

[19 : 41] Where things have been stolen from us that you long to restore? Would you encourage us as a people of God to share that joy with the people that we meet, probably in desperate circumstances?

So that doors can be opened, shackles can drop, and people once more can be free again. To be who you've called them to be.

Thank you, Lord. iva priessary. k