

“Do You Resign or Rejoice?”

Acts 16:11-40

Series: DIFFERENT Week 5. Don't Resign, Rejoice

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Near my son Peter's house in North Jersey is a place time forgot called Wild West City. For over sixty years this dusty street lined by frontier store fronts has been the stage for stagecoaches, bank robberies, gunfights and can-can girls. It looks like the leftover movie set from F Troop. In fact 95-year-old Larry Storch, Corporal Agarn, even shows up at the Saloon that bears his name. You can get a shave, a haircut, a tooth pulled and be fitted for your coffin all the same store. Wild West City is a recreation of Dodge City, Kansas in 1880. I just finished a book on Dodge City which called it “The Wickedest Town in the American West.” And that was also true of Wild West City. The minute I told them I was a preacher they locked me and my partner Ben in the town jail.

I've visited some real prisons. When the doors lock and the gates clang shut, you are in a different world – a place very few people ever want to be. Separated from loved ones, shut up in a cell. It's a place of despair, hopelessness and fear. I'm always relieved when they let me leave. Maybe you've never seen the inside of a jail cell or heard the bars clang behind you but you feel locked up just the same.

- Bound by an illness that won't let go - You were only going in for a routine check up. How did you wind up in this cycle of treatments?
- Chained to some shame from the past – No matter how many times you try to forget it, the memory haunts you.
- Shackled by an addiction – You made a vow you would never do it again. And yet the old itch is calling. The old hunger gnawing.
- Restrained by a difficult person – When you started that dream job, you never thought it would turn into a nightmare. When you were making wedding plans you didn't think divorce would be a possibility. When you cradled that little bundle of joy in the hospital you never expected to get into such arguments or say such angry things.
- Detained by disturbing circumstances – The bills keep pouring in, the debt weighs you down. You are juggling all these responsibilities but it's getting harder to keep them all up in the air.

You're a prisoner of despair, hopelessness and fear and you can't see any way out. Sometimes you just want to give up and resign.

Sooner or later every person gets locked up by life. Christians are not immune to such trials. There's no “Get Out of Jail Free Card.” What we receive is the power to be

Different. God tells us, “Don’t Resign, Rejoice!” In Romans Paul writes, “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” (Romans 12:12). He even told the Philippians to, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4) It sounds simplistic, idealistic, even insensitive. Yet Paul wrote these words from prison in Rome to a place where he once was in prison: Philippi.

When Paul preached in Philippi he attracted some unwanted advertising.

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” (Acts 16:16-17).

This free promotion, however, starts to get as irritating as repeating robocalls.

She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!” At that moment the spirit left her (Acts 16:18).

There may be some irritating and annoying people in your life. They take up your time. They invade your space. You wish they would just leave you alone. Paul isn’t distressed with the girl but with the demon in her. So he delivers her from slavery to her owners and to the evil spirit. Paul sets her free.

Who are the difficult people in your life? Why do you find them irritating and annoying? Now ask yourself another question: what in that person’s life is causing them to be that way? What is imprisoning them: drugs, drink, past abuse, emotional pain, loneliness, mental or physical illness? It’s likely they need understanding, not rejection. They may need counseling and treatment. Some, like the slave girl, need deliverance from abuse, trafficking, spiritual oppression. All of them need prayer.

Dr. Paul Randolph, the director of Insight Christian Counseling, where Susan Sciaratta is a counselor, told me some distressing news. Through his work with the local police he discovered Southampton has more Massage Parlors, which are fronts for prostitution, than Pizza Parlors. The women workers are prisoners of trafficking. So the churches partnered with the town council to make laws to shut them down. Now, instead of 8 massage parlors there is one. Then I asked, “Where did the women go?” “That’s the next problem,” Dr. Randolph said, “They have to get them away from this area because the dark forces of organized crime do not want to lose their source of income.”

What is the mission of the Church? It’s the same as Jesus’ mission.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Luke 4:18-19

Our mission is to set people free – free from sin and shame, free from poverty and illness, free from injustice and addiction, free from doubt and disbelief, free from physical and spiritual oppression.

Paul goes to Philippi to set people free with the power of Jesus Christ. After he sets the slave girl free, the next person Paul sets free is the one who takes away his freedom. The owners of the slave girl are furious about her deliverance. In their eyes she is property not a person, an income not an individual. Her owners drag Paul and Silas into the marketplace and begin to stoke up the Anti-Semitism of Philippi.

They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.” The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks (Acts 16:20-24).

Stripped, whipped, beaten and bleeding Paul and Silas are shackled in the stockade in the darkest dungeon. There is no way out. If it were me, I'd be crying about the injustice, I'd be crying for my lawyer, I'd probably be crying. What do Paul and Silas do? They sing.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them (Acts 16:25).

They use that opportunity to praise God and declare Him Lord even in prison. During their hymn sing, the jail is rocked by an earthquake which breaks their chains and busts open the doors. When the guard sees his jail split wide open he prepares to do the only honorable thing for a Roman soldier: suicide. But Paul and Silas, who could have let their enemy kill himself, reach out in love to set him free.

But Paul shouted, “Don't harm yourself! We are all here!” The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house (Acts 16:28-32).

That night, the Jailer takes Paul and Silas home. First he washes their wounds. Then they wash away his sins with the water of baptism.

Paul did not resign. He rejoiced. How? Years later, from his jail in Rome he tells the Philippians how to hold onto joy.

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:11-12).

Contentment - that's the secret! Don't pursue happiness. It's haphazard. It happens only in fleeting moments. Paul imparts not the secret of happiness, but something more permanent, more enduring: the secret of joy, contentment, fulfillment, peace. Do you want contentment through the ups and downs? There are four key phrases in this verse.

First, "I have learned." Contentment doesn't come in a can and you can't download the app. It takes learning and practice. You must follow and copy Jesus.

Second, "I have learned the secret." Contentment is a secret. It's not obvious. It's the opposite of what the world tells you to do. The world says, "Grab all you can get." Jesus says, "Let go." The world says, "Win!" Jesus says, "Surrender."

Third, "I have learned the secret of being content." Contentment is a deep feeling of fulfillment, peace, joy.

Fourth, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and all circumstances." Happiness depends on the circumstances. If things go well for you, you're happy. If they don't, you're depressed. If you hold onto them they will take you for a ride. Contentment lasts through the ebb and flow, the rise and fall of life. How did Paul do it? He didn't hold on to the circumstances. How do you let go of the circumstances and learn the secret of joy? Here are three circumstances you must let go.

I will not be controlled by the opinion of others. "I know what it is to be humiliated and exalted" (Philippians 4:12) Paul says, 'It doesn't matter to me whether I am pumped up or put down by others.' Most of us know what it means to be put down: Cruel words on the playground, the evaluation of our employers, the criticism of peers or parents. These opinions stay with us and in us. Your whole life may be controlled by the constant condemning comments of voices from the past. You may even put yourself down. "They won't like me. I don't measure up. I'm not in their league." It's impossible to be content when you feel you have to perform for critics.

The other side is the praise of peers. This may not seem hard to handle. Yet pride is a very seductive drug. It is easy to become addicted to the spotlight and let it go to your head. Yet, inevitably, there comes that moment when the spotlight moves on to someone else and you are left standing in the dark. One wise person said, "You will not fall with their criticism, if you do not rise with their praise." A content person is not controlled by the opinion of others. They receive love and acceptance from Jesus.

I will not be controlled by my inner hungers. "I have learned the secret of being well fed or hungry." (Philippians 4:12). The word "well-fed" describes a calf that is stuffed and fattened for slaughter. Inner hungers exert a powerful influence over your

life. It is hard to swim against the tide of a culture which tells you to satisfy every want, pleasure, and desire. My daughter Kristin works in advertising. She shared with me a basic goal of ads is to make the customer dissatisfied with what they have and hungry for what you are selling. Your inner hunger can be manipulated by others, like the calf that is stuffed and fattened for the slaughter. But the person who is content will not be pressured by the ache of inner hungers. They receive fulfillment from Jesus.

I will not be controlled by the power of money. "I have learned the secret of living in plenty and in poverty" (Philippians 4:12) someone sent me the following email joke: "All I ask is a chance to prove that money can't make me happy." Wealth brings as many problems as poverty. In a survey people were asked how much income it would take to achieve the American Dream. No matter what their level of income the general consensus was the American Dream requires twice as much money as their present income. The person who is content will not be controlled by the power of money. They receive true treasure from Jesus. Paul says,

I can do everything through (Christ) who gives me strength...And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:10, 19)

Paul learned the secret of contentment from Christ. It didn't come easily or instantly. It took years of failure, of trial and error and patience. But Jesus is a patient teacher. Gradually he learned that only Christ's opinion of him matters, an opinion of utter love; that only Christ could truly satisfy his inner hungers; that only Christ could give him riches that last for eternity. That is the secret of contentment. Don't hold onto the circumstances: they will take you for a ride. Hold on to Christ and be content.

About a month ago I stopped at a gas station in New Jersey. The attendant, a young woman, came up to my car sneezed, coughed and said, "Jesus, Mary and Joseph." She said to me, "I have a cold." I handed her my credit card and said, "Does prayer help with that?" She replied, "Oh, I'm spiritual but not religious. Are you religious?" "A little," I said. "Well," she continued, "I don't go to church. I don't think you need to go someplace to worship God." "Maybe not," I conceded. "But I did have to come to this gas station to be filled up or my car would be going nowhere. Maybe that's one reason we gather for worship – it's the place you get filled up with God." "Well I don't need to go to a building." "Maybe not," I agreed, "But I do need other people just as I needed you to fill the tank." "Well I don't like to go to church because they are always asking for money." "So," I teased, "You mean I don't have to pay for the gas you just put in my car?" She replied with a smile, "Too late. I already charged your credit card." "Why not try out a new church – they'll fill you up with God's love and you don't have to pay a thing." I asked her first name and if it would be okay for me to pray for her to find a church to call home. She smiled and said, "Sure."

Why do we gather in this place? To fill up with joy and to set people free. When the ups and downs of life take you on a rollercoaster ride, when the situations and circumstances cause you to despair and make you want to resign, God wants to fill you up with contentment, peace and joy which last no matter what the circumstances.

Why do we ask you to give to God at Woodside? For the same reasons – to fill people up with God’s joy and to set people free. That’s why, in a few minutes, I’m going to ask you to come forward and make a commitment of what you will give to God’s ministry and mission at Woodside in 2019. I ask you to stretch farther than you have before, to even combine what you give to the ministry fund and what you give to Share the Story in one offering starting in January. Why? We want to fill people with joy and set people free. For some, that will happen here. Others have to go to jail to be set free.

It was in jail that God set him free. At the age of 9 he was already leading a life of crime and drug addiction. By age 11 his father left the family. With no father and no Heavenly Father, since his family never went to church, life quickly spiraled out of control. From 15 to 32 he headed ever deeper into the drug trade and came close to death several times. Finally, on October 1, 1997 they put him behind bars in Philadelphia.

Quite honestly it was an absolute Godsend because I wouldn't have made it. Upon arriving I asked for something to read and they gave me a Bible. I said I don't know nothing about this book. The man who gave it to him said, “That's okay it knows everything about you.”

On October 9th 1997 he attended his first worship service in the prison chapel. The message was on the unconditional love of God. He was so overwhelmed, he came forward and surrendered his life to Jesus. He told the preacher, “I’m coming back here.” The preacher laughed because a lot of guys come back to prison.

I said “You don't understand I'm coming back in to stand where you are one day and tell people what God is doing in my life.” I realized at that point I was different. Upon release I prayed to be involved in prison ministry.

And today that’s where you will find him: preaching the Good News in the same prison chapel where he was saved. Some of you know him. His name is Bob Sofronski. With the partnership and support of Woodside, Bob started Christian Life Prison and Recovery Ministry. Today they not only bring hope and joy to those behind bars but also recovery and healing to those who are released. With the leadership of Scott and Michelle Burgess from Woodside they also offer recovery cafes and worship services. Bob says,

The Joy of my heart is to see people's lives changed right in front of me. That’s the most rewarding of all. I know God has called me to share his word to those who are bound up in shackles and chains not just on the inside of a prison but here in our society and communities. I thank God every day for the people of Woodside who believed in our ministry from the ground up. We bring hope to broken homes and restore lives ravaged by drug addiction. I am different because someone share the love of Jesus with me in prison.

Don’t be imprisoned by your circumstances
Hold on to Christ and rejoice!