

Part 2: Jesus Frees the Prisoner

Jonny Kiedrowski | Psalm 107:10-16

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As we continue this Advent series and look at the rescue mission of Christ through the lens of Psalm 107, this morning we are confronted in the passage that Dean just read with words like prison, irons, affliction, and the shadow of death. Things are getting heavy.

I bet that most of us don't think about prison all that much. But can you imagine the nightmare of going to prison. Worse still, can you imagine going for a crime that you didn't commit? In my lifetime I've heard a few of these stories.

There was a man named Richard Phillips who was living in this nightmare. In 1971, at just 25 years old, he was wrongfully convicted of a double murder he did not commit. The evidence against him was minimal, and was based almost entirely on a coerced confession. Phillips was sentenced to life in prison, his freedom stripped away.

For 45 years, Richard lived behind bars and maintained his innocence each day. He watched as decades slipped by, his family grew older, and life continued outside while he remained isolated in a cell.

The tide began to turn for Richard in 2017 when the Exoneration Project took up his case. They uncovered that there was significant prosecutorial misconduct, including the suppression of evidence that should have exonerated Phillips at the time of his trial. In March of 2018, Richard Phillips walked out of prison a free man, after nearly half a century.

Richard's story is the nightmare of being imprisoned when you don't deserve it, and our passage today deals with those who are in prison and they do. Yet the gospel hope for each and every one of us is to trust in the chain breaking, door shattering Savior who would take our punishment and give us his kingdom. The one who was the least guilty in all of history sent himself into our prison, experiencing all the wrath of God, so that captives like us would be set free.

Today we'll reflect on the reality of the state of sinners without Christ as God's enemies, but it's also no stretch of the imagination to compare the physical bonds of prison to the spiritual bonds of sin that can bring isolation and despair into the lives of believers.

Last week Tyler began this series with the main point: "Jesus came to rescue the lost"

Our big idea for today, for those without Christ and for those who believe, is that:

Jesus Came to Free the Prisoner

Using Psalm 107 as our guide, we'll consider

- The Cost of Sin and Rebellion
- The Grace of God's Redemption
- The Freedom Song that Rings in Heaven

It's often said that to understand the good news of the gospel; for it to be good news, you need to understand the bad news first. This passage gets right down to it.

Verses 10 and 11

*10 Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death,
prisoners in affliction and in irons,
11 for they had rebelled against the words of God,
and spurned the counsel of the Most High.*

And so immediately there is a prison, and there are chains - but there is also a reason for all of it.
This is our first point:

The Cost of Sin and Rebellion

The prisoners in our passage are in prison for two reasons. We see them in verse 11.

V11.

*11 for they had rebelled against the words of God,
and spurned the counsel of the Most High.*

—

Not only is there rebellion against God - which is an active word. I don't think you can be a passive rebel - but there is a rebellion, specifically, against the word of God. God's law, God's commands, God's rules for living a life that's honoring to him and good for you.

The second reason is a lot like the first, but it opens up the window more on the state of the heart. It says they "spurned the counsel of the Most High". They spurned it. They thought God's counsel, God's word, was rubbish. It wasn't worth considering. It wasn't valuable. So there are two related charges against these prisoners and at the root of them both there's one big problem: Pride.

Hearts that hear God's word and say:

"I know better", "You don't have my best interest in mind", "You don't know what you're talking about", "I will decide what is right".

This is the heart that rebels against the word of God. Can you imagine thinking that you know better than God? The truth we all can imagine it. We do it all the time. If we're honest, we have all struggled with this, which means we're all guilty. We think like this because of pride.

So in this sense, what is Pride?

One Theologian said:

"Pride is a state of mind or, more essentially, a condition of the heart in which a person has supplanted the rule of God over his/her life with the rule of their own will. Instead of depending entirely on God, as was God's design, a proud heart now looks to itself to decide what is good and evil."

The bible has a lot to say about pride, and the proud, and it is never good. Pride is often described it as something that God hates. He hates it. He hates it not only because it denies him the honor that he is due as the creator and sustainer of all things, but because of what it does to his creation. While Disney movies may encourage us to follow our hearts, God reveals in Jeremiah 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" To navigate life and avoid being a prisoner of sin we don't need to follow our hearts, we need to trust in the Lord with all our heart.

Proverbs 3:5-8 says

*5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.*

*6 In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.*

*7 Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.*

*8 It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones.*

—

The prisoners in our song today have missed the memo. Pride is so awful and so damaging, precisely because it is essential for sin. You simply cannot sin without believing that God's rules don't apply to you. It's the prerequisite.

C.S. Lewis said,

"The essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind."

So what is the cost of a prideful disregard for God's word?

V. 10

*10 Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death,
prisoners in affliction and in irons,*

There are natural consequences to poor choices in life and Montana is a place where we could experience all sorts of them. If you were to go hiking and get off the trail, don't be surprised if you get lost. If you float the river without sunscreen, don't be surprised if you get burned. If you pick up a grizzly bear cub, well... don't be surprised what happens. It's not going to be good.

There are natural consequences to sin as well. For unbelievers and believers. There are consequences. You could end up in a real prison for your sin. Many things that the bible calls sin are things that we have laws against. For many of us though we end up trapped in our own personal prison. Today, there are, almost certainly, people in this room that have been engaging in the same patterns of sinful thoughts and actions for 10, 20, 30 maybe even 40 years. They would like for things to be different. If I'm talking about you, I want you to understand that I know that you would like to change, but you might like your sin more.

You'd like to change, but for years and maybe decades, pride has stopped you. It has isolated you. Forced you to live in darkness. Forced you to smile on Sunday, and say that everything is fine while doubting God's goodness every other day of the week. This sounds like a prison. It sounds like bad news.

If you are in a prison like this, I want you to know that it is your pride who is the jailer. Your rebellion against the words of God and against the counsel of the Most High have put you in this prison, but your pride is what's keeping you there. Your pride that tells you that you don't need God's word. Your pride that tells you that you don't need to pray. Your pride that tells you that you don't need to confess your sins. Your pride that tells you that you don't need the church in your life, that you don't need discipleship, and that you don't need fellowship. Your pride tells you that all these things will do nothing so why even bother. But doing nothing is how you got here in the first place. It's time for a change. Brothers and Sisters, if this describes you today, you need good news.

The Grace of God's Redemption

If pride is how we got into this mess then humility is the way out. To change from living with the effective posture of "I know best" to one of "I don't know anything without God" is a journey and it will not be easy, but it is the way forward and God will help us. If you're his, you will be humbled either by your own actions or by his.

I'm reminded of a song called "The Master's Calling" by Thad Cockrell where he says:

"Bow down while your knees still bend, the master's calling"

For our prisoners in the Psalm, they seem to have missed opportunity to humble themselves, and yet God will still be gracious to them. He will bend their knees.

Look at the next section of our passage

V. 12-14

*12 So he bowed their hearts down with hard labor;
they fell down, with none to help.*

*13 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.*

*14 He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death,
and burst their bonds apart.*

Here, God actively humbles His people. Their imprisonment wasn't sufficient; it took the harshness of labor to break through their stubbornness. Yet, in His mercy, God responds to their cries, delivering them from despair, darkness, and death, dramatically bursting their chains apart. This imagery isn't just of liberation; it's of a violent, transformative release that ensures their freedom is irrevocable. God intervened, created the conditions for heart change, and was faithful to be gracious to those who didn't deserve it.

I bet there are stories in here of God doing things to wake us up to our need for him. And what I think we would all say is, "I wish that it didn't take what it took to wake me up, but I would never wish to go back." Some of us are going to need the wake up call from God. But maybe in God's grace this sermon is yours and you want to get ahead of God's discipline and you want to discipline yourself. How do we do it?

This past Tuesday in my class with the Jr High and High School students we were looking at Ephesians 4:17-32 and we spent a little while discussing verses 17-24 which talk about our growth in holiness and obedience.

It says

17 Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. 19 They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

20 But that is not the way you learned Christ!— 21 assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus,

22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,

23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

We talked about putting off the old self and putting on the new.

God begins to renew our minds when we come to faith, and he can change our desires, but we put off and we put on. It's not done for us. It is never done for us. You can't get out of it. You're going to have to put off sin. You're going to have to put on righteousness.

Just like how our rebellion against God is not a passive act, becoming a Christian doesn't magically put your obedience on autopilot. I often wish that it did.

In order to put on the new self I need to take off the old self. I can only be one self.

It will always feel like you're losing something to take off the old self, especially when the old self presented itself as though everything is fine and the new self in humility says that things are wrong and I need help. It will be like losing who you are. It will feel like losing your identity, because you are. As 1 Corinthians 6:19 says - "You are not your own. You were bought with a price"

The prideful old self leads to prison, isolation and bondage, and the humble new self is free in Christ. Free to be a messy work in progress who needs the Lord. Free to cry out to God, knowing that he cares for you. Where pride locks us in, humility unlocks freedom.

In verse 12 our prisoners finally get it. They are humbled and at the end of themselves.

Unlike Richard Philips from the story at the beginning, they were not falsely accused. They deserved prison and today we deserve judgment for our sins and for all the ways we've rebelled against God. Our hearts condemn us. The verdict is in. In and of ourselves there is nothing we can do but cry out to God for mercy.

The beauty of Christ's advent lies here. Despite our rebellion, Jesus came to free us from not just the bondage of sin but its eternal consequences. This is the beauty of this season where we remember Christ and all he's done. He came to rescue the lost and to free the prisoner. In the incarnation, though we rebelled against the words of God, the word was made flesh and dwelt among us. Despite our rebellion, Jesus came to free us from not just the bondage of sin but from its eternal consequences. At the cross Jesus takes on the death sentence we deserved and we receive an eternal "not guilty" that causes multitudes upon multitudes of angels in the heavenly places to rejoice in God for his astounding grace toward us.

V14.

He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart.

I love these words. Can you imagine being in chains and seeing them not break apart, not crumble to dust. Jesus has burst them apart. It's explosive. It's dramatic. They're not going back on. They can't. Because Jesus was bound on Earth, willingly taking on the chains of human limitation and suffering, we can be eternally set free from the shackles of sin and death.

Though the way to fight sin and pursue righteousness is through humility, you will never have to be humbled more than Jesus was. The King of Heaven, came to be born in a stable and die in the place of sinners. Jesus was obedient to God's command even unto death, so we might be obedient to God's command through faith in him and receive eternal life.

How gracious is God to us?

The eternally set free are eternally thankful. It is a beautiful, pride-destroying reality to know that you had nothing to do with the greatest thing that will ever happen to you. It's humbling. But it also leads us to worship. It leads us to worship now and forever.

The Freedom Song that Rings in Heaven

Have you ever heard The Beatles song “Hey Jude”? I’ve got nothing against “Hey Jude”. It’s fine if it comes on the radio or if I’m listening to a Beatles playlist or something. There’s a lot worse songs than “Hey Jude” out there. But, I wouldn’t want to listen to it twice back to back. I’d get really tired of it, really quickly. And that’s because the last 4 minutes of “Hey Jude” is just:

“NAA NAA NAA NANA NA NA, NANA NA NA, Hey Jude!”

Isn’t it funny how you have all of the music and the effort to play and record it, the band rocking out, there’s this crowd singing together with one voice, and their hands are clapping, they’re shouting at the top of their lungs and the message that they want to ear-worm into the culture for the ages is: “Hey! Jude! What a waste! Imagine if they had sang about something important. Something that mattered. What if we sang about something truly profound, something that resonates with the depths of our existence?”

Now I remember, when I was growing up, I would hear people say that when we get to heaven it’s going to be like a worship service that never ends and we’re going to sing forever.

And as a child I would think to myself: “Oh no. Please no. This is not my idea of Heaven”

Now I don’t actually think that heaven is just a non-stop church service, and even if it is, it’s going to be better than this one. Thankfulness and wonder will be a part of every heavenly minute and we can start living that way now.

Imagine a song so profound it never fades. That’s what we have in Christ—a melody of grace that transforms our lives and invites others into the same freedom. We have something better to sing about than the world does. We have a better song than “Hey Jude”. Something deep and extraordinary that changes your life now and forever. What if there was a song you didn’t get tired of singing?

Let’s finish our passage in God’s songbook by looking at V. 15-16

*15 Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wondrous works to the children of man!*

*16 For he shatters the doors of bronze
and cuts in two the bars of iron.*

I’m struck by some of the language in this passage, in this song, that we’re reading today. Specifically, how it describes what God does.

In V. 14 it says that
He burst their bonds apart.

In V. 16 it says that
he shatters the doors of bronze.

Our liberation isn’t gentle or passive, it’s ferocious. It’s described with terms like “shattering” and “bursting.” This suggests a force so powerful, so intent on freeing us from the shackles of sin and despair, that it breaks through barriers with divine ferocity. Jesus doesn’t walk through the door, he shatters it. He doesn’t undo our chains, he bursts them apart. The chains of sin no longer bind us and the doors that held us captive are in a million pieces. A pursuing, ferocious love like this is worth writing a song about.

And yet, it will be difficult to feel like you can thank God for his steadfast love and wondrous works if your prideful heart causes you to stay in the prison rather than walk out the door.

This passage begins by calling us prisoners and ends with us being called children. If you have been wrestling with condemning sin in your heart the way out is like a child being led by their Father.

V14

He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death

As children, our God desires to bring us out of the darkness and into the light of his steadfast love. If today you believe that the darkness of a prison where you suffer in sin is safer than the arms of the Savior you may understand the message of gospel but you might not understand who it's for: It's for you.

It's for you.

It will impossible to thank God for his steadfast love and his wondrous works if you have not received them. Singing the freedom song of being delivered by Jesus makes no sense if you're not willing to go with him where he leads. Brother, Sister, go with him where he leads. Following Jesus was always going to cost you everything but we have promises in God's word that say "whoever loses his life will find it."

Bow down while your knees still bend. The Master's calling.

Whether you have been a believer stuck in a pattern of sin or you want to put your faith in Christ today, bow down while your knees still bend.

Church, Jesus came to free the prisoner, but there are prisoners and slaves to sin all around us. There are those who will not repent, those who will humble themselves when they hear the gospel, and there are those will be humbled by God. Let's be gracious with them all. Maybe today, someone will reach out to and ask you to help them get out of the prison they've been in. God's been gracious to us and given us thankful hearts full of hope. Let's bring hope to those who need it.

In V.15 it says

*15 Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wondrous works to the children of man!*

Over the last few years I have noticed a shift in the culture among the people I interact with in the world. The change is this: Everyone is ready for hope. Everyone willing to hear a good story. No one refuses prayer.

The command in this passage is that we would thank the Lord for his steadfast love and for his wondrous works to the children of man. No where in that command does it say we have to do it privately or quietly. Do you bring others into your gratefulness to God? Maybe your story is a part of what God will use to bring someone else out of darkness.

I love telling people what I mess I was before Christ. God didn't take a nice boy and make him better. In my heart, I was awful. And if you didn't know I was awful, it was because I was lying to you. While I was dead in sin every new way that I discovered to exalt myself and rebel against the words of God only served to condemn me more and confirm how lost I was. And yet now, because I have been set free, everything that I once was only serves to proclaim all more how powerful the salvation of our God is.

All that condemns us before we know Christ turns into one of our greatest evangelistic tools, because if God could save me, he can certainly save you. I have confidence in the Good news of Jesus Christ because I've experienced it, I've lived it, and I've sung it with a glad heart.

Christmas is almost here. Everyone is ready for hope. This is a time where the world is surrounded by music and songs of the season and while I love Christmas songs, the world needs to hear the song of the redeemed. The song of those who have been freed. And if we're going to sing it in heaven we might as well start now. This is season naturally inclined towards hope and celebration, there's no better time to echo our freedom song and our songs of thankfulness in the grace of God. It's a moment where the secular and sacred overlap, where the world's longing for peace can meet the message of peace through Christ.

I want to close with the words from a song in Revelation chapter 5. A song of thankfulness sung in heaven, when the redeemed of God gather together with all of the heavenly host and praise our rescuing Savior.

"Worthy are you, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"
