

Paul and Silas in prison—a remarkable story with much to teach us.

First, the power of Jesus over evil spirits. This woman was possessed, and through that possession claimed to predict the future. What the evil spirit was saying about Paul and Silas was true—they were telling people how to be saved—but that this witness came from such a disreputable source was no help to them. It is not much good if a well-known thief says that you are an honest man. People are more likely to believe the reverse. And in the end, Paul decides that enough is enough and commands in the name of Jesus Christ that the spirit leave the woman. So note the power of Jesus over evil spirits. There are evil spirits in this world. But at the name of Jesus demons fear and flee. Second, note Paul's and Silas' response to persecution. They are in jail. What do they do? They are praying and singing hymns to God. That's how to deal with persecution! Jesus himself commanded us as much: "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12). Rejoice and be glad! The temptation when we are persecuted is to sulk and moan. To go into our shell. To take it personally. But remember that people attack us for preaching Christ because they are opposed to Christ. We are to pray, then, that they might come to their senses, and rejoice, that we have been counted worthy of being persecuted for the name of Christ. There are times, of course, to also correct misimpressions. Paul's advice to Timothy on this is clear:

"And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will." (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

Third, note the way that Paul and Silas made the most of the opportunity that was given to them. When there was an earthquake—whether a "natural" event that was orchestrated by the hand of God, or a supernatural event by God's intervention, makes not much difference in practice—Paul and Silas seized the opportunity for witness. The result is that the jailer and his household believe and are baptized! Remember that when persecution comes, with it is often a particular opportunity for witness. Pray that God would give you eyes to see when the opportunity comes, and clarity of speech and boldness to make the most of that opportunity.

Fourth, note the unembarrassed way that Paul and Silas use the law of the land. Christians can sometimes feel it is illegitimate to protect their rights to worship freely through the law courts or legal process. But Paul and Silas, as citizens of Rome, knew they had rights, they knew those rights had been violated, and they were going to make sure that the authorities were brought back into line. They did this for themselves but also for those other Christians who may not have been as bold or courageous as they were. It is important that we protect the rights of Christians to worship for our sakes, and also for the sake of those who will come after us.

Fifth, note the way that Paul's and Silas' minds worked as they returned to the church. They went there and encouraged them. Not the other way around! They had been in prison. They had been persecuted. But they went to Lydia's house, met with the church, and encouraged them. When we are persecuted, it is often those around us who most need the encouragement. They fear that we have been hurt, or they fear for their own safety.

So when you are under attack, remember: That Jesus has power over evil spirits; To rejoice and be glad; To make the most of the opportunity for witness; To encourage other Christians.