

TURN ADVERSITY TO YOUR ADVANTAGE!

Today's Text: Acts 16: 16- 40

Extracts:

Then the multitude rose up together against [Paul and Silas]; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. Having received such charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. But at midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed [Acts 16: 22-26]

Sawyer Rosenstein is an 18-year-old freshman majoring in communication at Syracuse University, New York State, USA.¹ On May 16, 2006, while in high school, a bully punched him so hard that he fell to his feet. Two days later, he had to be rushed to the hospital where he was pronounced paralyzed. Even after 19 surgeries and a complete spinal fusion, he remains paralyzed from the waist down. In 2009, his parents filed a lawsuit against the bully, the school board and others, claiming that the school officials knew (or should have known) that Sawyer's attacker had violent tendencies. The family settled with the bully in 2010 for undisclosed terms. In April 2012, the New Jersey school board in the district where Sawyer was then a student agreed to a settlement of \$4.2 million. Reacting to his victory, Sawyer said, "It feels really good to finally have put a sense of closure ... that this really difficult part of my life is behind me."

Sawyer may never walk again but he has turned adversity to his advantage. Beyond the money settlement, his case has drawn attention to dealing with a major social problem in schools all over the world. So, what are you doing about your situation? Right now, you may be facing one form of adversity or another- material, physical, emotional or spiritual. Instead of whining and cursing, are you ready to turn it into an advantage? Are you ready to turn from prey to predator, from victim to victor? In this week's Bible story, Paul and Silas were thrown into jail for no just cause. By the following morning, they had turned their circumstances to their advantage! For more, read this week's study and it will bless your life.

¹ Story is based on: Miranda Leitsinger, "\$4.2 million settlement for student paralyzed by bully," Thur., Apr. 19, 2012; <http://usnews.msnbc.msn.com/news/2012/04/19/11289813-42-million-settlement-for-student-paralyzed-by-bully?lite>

1. Background: Paul and Silas are unjustly put in jail

The Psalmist says, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” [Ps. 30: 5]. How do you apply that verse to your own situation? Literally, night is when most people go to bed and morning is when they wake up. However, for a worker on night duty, morning is the time to go to bed! So, we can expand our understanding of the verse to indicate more of moving from sad or stressful moments to victory. ***When you are passing through adversity, you are in the night time of your life. But when you turn it to your advantage and recover from it, your morning of joy has just dawned!*** So the Lord is actually challenging you to trust Him to help you to turn your unacceptable situations around.

Right now, some of us may be dealing with one kind of adversity or other. The hardship may be self-inflicted, such as when we deliberately steal or cheat and get caught. The hard times that we are passing through may be due to an economic downturn that makes it harder to get a new or better job. Some of us may have relocated due to natural disasters (such as flooding) or man-made crises (such as political, ethnic or religious persecution). Some people may be dealing with more subtle forms of adversity, such as sexual harassment on the job, an unhappy marriage at home or a wayward prodigal child at large. ***No matter the form of hard times that you are facing, it is necessary to do something about it. You can surrender to your situation and weep or whine “forever.” That is hardly a good solution because, sooner than later, you will be courting high blood pressure. To deal with it may be harder but it is better to try it. After all, is your God not bigger than your problem?*** This week’s study will make the matter easier to deal with than you think!

The story begins with Paul with his team (Silas, Timothy and the physician, Luke) on his second missionary journey [Acts 16: 1, 10, 19; Lk 1:1-3; Acts 1: 1]. They were determined to go into the Roman province of Asia but, instead, the Holy Spirit directed them towards Europe [Acts 16: 6-8]. It was then that Paul had a night vision in which a man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him to come over there to help them. Immediately, he and his party travelled to Macedonia and preached the gospel to the people there. At Philippi, the foremost city in that region of Macedonia, they came across Lydia who (with her whole house) embraced the new faith and became a major pillar of the church there [vv. 9-15]. That takes us to the heart of this week’s study which can be summarised thus:

a) Their “offence”

As Paul and his team were going to prayer one day, a certain slave girl “possessed with ***a spirit of divination***” met them. Her masters used her for fortune-telling and she brought them much profit [v. 16]. What is a spirit of divination? It ***is a demonic spirit that has to be invoked*** with incantations and other forms of *abracadabra*. For example, during the

spiritual contest between 450 prophets of Baal and Elijah the prophet as to whose god/God was the true one, the idol worshippers “cried aloud, and cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances until the blood gushed out on them” and nothing happened, but when Elijah prayed, fire fell down from heaven [1 Kgs 18: 19- 29]. Thus, *the Holy Spirit operates by inspiration*. For example, while Peter was preaching Jesus to Cornelius and his household, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word” and onlookers “heard them speak with tongues and magnify God” [Acts 10: 44-46]. Therefore, be careful when they start forcing you to speak in tongues. If the Holy Spirit wants you to do so, He will inspire you.

Even though the demon-possessed girl spoke the truth concerning Paul’s mission in Macedonia (just as it was the demons who first recognized Jesus as the Son of God in the synagogue at Capernaum –Mk 1: 21-25), Paul immediately knew her source of power. As she followed them around each day, Paul commanded the evil spirit to get out of her in the name of Jesus Christ and it did. But those who were using her for business saw Paul and his party as a major threat to their trade. So, they cooked up false charges against Paul and Silas and dragged them before the magistrates [Acts 16: 17-19].

b) *Their ordeal*

Without any due process, the magistrates *stripped* Paul and Silas and commanded them to be *beaten with rods*. Then they threw them into jail and commanded the jailer to “keep them securely.” He *put* them “*into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks*” [vv. 20-24].

You can imagine the injustice and ‘police brutality’ that Paul and Silas suffered. No one cared about their fundamental human rights, especially the right to due process as Roman citizens. They were supposed to be presumed innocent until proved guilty. In their case, they *were beaten and put in jail without trial!* How often have your oppressors cared about your rights or even human dignity when they frame lies against you just to hurt you or your interests? Whoever cared to verify if Joseph ever touched Potiphar’s wife, not to talk of trying to rape her? Yet, they clamped him into prison for no just cause [Gen. 39: 13-20].

c) *But they took their case to God!*

But the oppressors could not silence Paul and Silas. At midnight, they began to pray and sing hymns to God and the other prisoners heard them [Acts 16: 25]! *They did not hide their faith but wanted everyone to know that their help would come from the Lord who made heaven and earth. He would not allow their feet to be moved. He would neither slumber nor sleep [Ps. 121: 2-4] until He had acted on behalf of His saints.*

As they sang, “suddenly there was a great earthquake” that shook the very foundations of the prison. Immediately, all the doors were opened and the chains on the prisoners were loosed! The keeper woke up and, thinking that the prisoners had all escaped, with all the doors open, drew his sword to kill himself. Paul stopped him with a loud call, assuring him that all the prisoners were still there. He sent for a light and “fell down trembling before Paul and Silas” [Acts 16: 25-29]! *The captive became the captor!*

d) *And they came out as victors!*

As soon as the prison officer brought them out of jail, he asked them, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They told him to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, he and his household, and he would be saved. As he took them to wash their stripes and dress their wounds, they used the opportunity to deepen his knowledge of the new faith. Immediately, he and his family were baptized. Then he set food before them and ‘rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household’ [vv. 30-35].

That was not all. In the morning, the magistrates sent to the prison keeper to let Paul and Silas go. *They refused to leave quietly!* Paul sent back to the magistrates, “They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out.” When the magistrates heard that, they got scared. So, they came and openly pleaded with Paul and Silas. They openly brought them out and begged them to leave the city [vv. 36-39]!

Guess who called the last shots! *Paul and Silas were openly humiliated but they also were openly vindicated.* The prison keeper and his family became Christians. You can be sure that the next batch of Christians that would be brought to him for detention would be treated as hotel guests, not prisoners! Paul and Silas have taught us how to turn adversity to our own advantage.

2. How to turn adversity to your advantage

From the foregoing study, we can turn adversity to our advantage by following these few simple steps:

a) *Be sure you know why you are being victimized*

The first thing that you need to establish is to know and understand why you are being victimized. For example, it *could be self-inflicted* for the word of God says “Be sure your sin will find you out” [Num. 32: 23]. After his adultery with Bathsheba, followed by the murder of her husband, Uriah, God told David that the sword would never depart from his house.

God added, “Behold, I will raise up adversity against you from your own house” [2 Sam. 12: 10-11]. See the ordeals that followed. One of his sons, Amnon, raped his half-sister, Tamar who was a virgin [2 Sam. 13: 1-14]. Two years later, her brother, Absalom killed Amnon [vv. 23, 28, 29], and later staged a revolt against his father, David [2 Sam. 15: 1-16].

Therefore, *quickly confess your sins if you perceive that your adversity is as a result of your broken relationship with God*. Nevertheless, God may forgive you your sins, as He did in the case of David, but their consequences must run their full course. For instance, God may forgive the fornicator or adulterer their sins but that will not stop the adversity of HIV/AIDs infection that could afflict them.

Your ordeal *could also be due to envy*. This type of adversity remains for as long as you keep making good progress in life. For example, Paul’s ordeal with Jews wherever he went was largely due to envy [Acts 17: 5]. King Saul pursued David to kill him largely out of envy [1 Sam. 18: 8-9]. When the Jewish leaders handed innocent Jesus over to Pilate to be crucified in place of the murderer, Barabbas, he knew that they did it out of envy [Matt. 27: 18]. *There is very little that you can do about envy because, as the word of God has put it, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution”* [2 Tim. 3: 12]. To turn envy-induced adversity to your advantage, *just learn to behave wisely at all times*. When David behaved wisely, Saul feared him and the people loved him [1 Sam. 18: 14-16].

Finally, your ordeal could be like Job’s where *you could merely be a bait that God wants to use to catch Satan and his wicked forces*. Like a worm on the fisherman’s hook, you have done nothing against anyone but you should *count it all joy* when you face such tribulations, *knowing that the testing of your faith will produce patience which when fully completed makes you perfect and complete, lacking nothing* [Jam. 1: 2-4].

b) *Seek redress*

You may not have the financial or political will to take on your tormentors. Even if you could, it might not be advisable if God should see your adversity as His battle. In such a case, you should report the matter to your God for His adjudication. Nonetheless, you must do what you have to do so as to give Him the free hand to fight for you. For example, Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns to God. That suggests adoration and worship. They were glad to be seen worthy to suffer for Christ’s sake. Therefore, you should do what you can do and let God take care of the rest. God says that you must not avenge because vengeance is His and He will repay [Rom. 12: 19]. Twice, David had the chance to kill Saul but he refused to do it [1 Sam. 24: 4-6; 26: 7-10]. Under the excruciating pain of

death on the cross, Jesus prayed for His tormentors, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do” [Lk 23: 34].

From the foregoing, we learn that we should not just stay there, crying each night, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen!” Get off your lazy bed of blame shifting and self-pity and latch on to the high road to success and victory. A Christmas tree may have sweet fruits but it has no roots! Get up and go plant a real fruit tree!

3. Conclusion: Sin could be your main adversity!

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us, “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil things against you falsely for My sake, rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” [Matt. 5: 11-12]. Clearly, that hope does not apply to those who are persecuted or suffering for their sins. Many of us are suffering from adversities caused by adultery, fornication, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery hatred, contentions, jealousies, selfish ambitions, heresies, murders, drunkenness and revelries, among others [Gal. 5: 19-21].

By confessing your sins and returning to God through His Son, Jesus Christ, you can easily turn adversities from such sources to your advantage. You become inheritors of the kingdom of God which is characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness, among others [vv. 22-23]. Reject the wages of sin, which is death, and go on to the gift of God which is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord [Rom. 6: 23].

Turn your adversity to your advantage.