

Text: Acts 16:26-34

Theme: Our powerlessness in suffering exposes God's power more vividly, and utilizes it more.

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## [Book Thesis: The Power of God Spreads the Gospel]

### **The Fingerprints of God in Suffering**

The suffering of Indonesian Christians between 1999-2003 was nearly indescribable. The Maluccan and Sulawesi islands ran red with their blood. Muslims killed 10,000 believers, and forced thousands more to convert to Islam. Not only churches, but whole villages were set ablaze. In their savage attempt to cleanse the island of believers, an Islamic paramilitary force called Laskar Jihad displaced nearly a million refugees.

Indonesian Pastor Rinaldy Damanik publicly denounced the militant group and criticized the government's handling of the crisis. So, in August, 2002 when his vehicle was stopped while rescuing Christians under attack, there was suspicion he would not be handled fairly. After a search of the vehicle, he was charged with weapons' violations. He was arrested, imprisoned, and last summer sentenced to 3 years.

In December, someone tried to kill him with rat poison; he survived. But in February of this year he developed a serious kidney problem. Prison officials refused petitions to permit him to travel to Jakarta, the only place he could get needed surgery.

But God's fingerprints are starting to be seen in the midst of Pastor Damanik's suffering. WEF (World Evangelical Fellowship) is reporting that several months ago, a Muslim cleric had a vision in which he was instructed to visit Damanik in prison. He did, and was deeply impacted by the pastor's faith. So much so that he intervened with prison authorities, with tears, begging them to let him go to Jakarta. 3 weeks ago, permission was granted. Glory to God.

Suffering strips *us* of our power. We can't stop our pain, or bring back our loved one, or repay the debt. The barren woman can't open her womb, and the spurned lover can't make her love him. But as God explains in 2 Cor.12, *our* suffering actually *stimulates His* power. Have you see God's fingerprints in your suffering; evidence of His work? PRAY. READ Acts 16:26-34.

For casting out a demon, Paul and Silas had been beaten, and put in prison stocks. They could not stop the pain in their backs, or the throbbing in their legs, they could not walk out of jail. Yet they sang, worshiped God, and prayed.

And while they were helpless, God flew into action. He pushed a rock mass along a fault beneath the city, and pressure stored up within the rock for a hundred years exploded on the unsuspecting countryside. Homes rumbled, burning torches and candles fell causing fires, people were tossed from their beds, a few roofs collapsed, and some smaller huts became rubble.

But in the prison, the results were as precise as a surgeon's scalpel. The stone foundation lurched and roiled, wrenching every cell door free from its lock. On orders from heaven, the manacles guarding society from the threat of mayhem, brutality and jeopardy, fell off the prisoner's wrists and feet. Convicts stared dumbfounded at the opportunity of a lifetime.

In a panic, the jailer rushed from his home. Seeing the outline of calamity in the darkness, his heart sank as he realized his inevitable fate. You see, when prisoners

escaped, jailers died. No gods would be blamed for the disaster. No investigative panel would search for other causes. There would be only a judge, a sword, and a dying jailer. Better to choose the moment and duration of death himself. He drew his sword and raised it to his heart.

“Don’t do it, we’re all here.” The voice surprised him enough to restrain the awful thrust. Couldn’t be. “Bring some lights.” In stunned silence he walked every corridor of the jail and accounted for each prisoner. He noticed a look on their faces. A strange one, a look of bewilderment. What convict would ever pass up such a chance at freedom? The jailer trembled in awe before the man who had spoken; what sort of man was this?

Falling on his face, he asked, “What must I do to be saved?” Don’t you just wish someone would ask *you* that! Wouldn’t it be great to be asked, instead of having to ask!

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” That raised questions for the jailer like it would for anyone: who is Jesus? What do you mean by “believe”? Saved from what? Saved for what? And so they shared the gospel with the jailer, his family and his servants (32).

### The Gospel

The answer remains the same today: believe on Jesus Christ. 2000 years of language evolution of language demands some clarification. The Hebrew understanding of the word “believe,” is much more than intellectual agreement. If you believe that it’s vital to the good of America to vote but don’t vote, that’s just intellectual agreement. If you believe that racial bigotry is a sin yet crack racial jokes, your believe is nothing more than intellectual agreement. James 2:19 says, “So, you believe that God is one; big deal. Demons do too, but tremble.”

The word “believe” is also translated “faith” in the NT. Biblical faith and belief mean not only agreeing with truth, *but*—devoted to *living* in agreement. “Why do you call me Lord, Lord, but do not do what I say,” (\_\_\_\_) could have been written to our generation. To believe is to agree to truth, *and* seek to conform to it.

What must *you* do to be saved? Some of you are not saved—not because you don’t know the answer, but because the answer does not *matter* to you. Or *appeal* to you. Maybe you’re like the Pharisees in Jn.12:42 who would not surrender to Christ lest such action get them expelled from the synagogue. Jesus said they loved the praise of people more than the praise of God. Maybe you’re here just to satisfy someone else, or because you’re curious. Whatever your level of interest or disinterest, I hope that you will become like me, like many of us. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. By doing so, you will change from...

- God’s enemy to God’s friend
  - Devil’s servant to God’s servant
  - Being destined to hell to destined for heaven
  - Having a meaningless life and death to one with a purpose
- Exchange...
- Powerlessness for power
  - Hopelessness for hope
  - Despair for joy
  - Love of sin for love of Christ

Having narrowly avoided judgment and death, the jailer was all ears. He and his household surrendered to Christ and were baptized. He washed the disciples' wounds and fed them well. And a man who almost went to hell by his own hand, found joy.

Let's list some of God's fingerprints in this account; demonstrations of his power:

1. Earthquake at a particular time in a particular place with a particular intensity—not too much, not too little.
2. Earthquake opened all cell doors, yet apparently did not collapse the jail.
3. Handcuffs fell off all the convicts (what earthquake would do that without harming the prisoners?)
4. Every prisoner had a golden opportunity to escape but didn't.
5. The warden asked for the gospel.
6. The warden gave his life to Christ
7. The warden's family gave their lives to Christ.
8. The disciples were given medical attention and food.

Paul and Silas had no power; But God did. *Full* power. Miracles everywhere. Some people think miracles have stopped. Maybe we've just stopped *noticing* them. Maybe we can't see beyond our complaints. God's fingerprints all around us, all over us, all over others, hidden behind our tears, our anger, our envy, our self-pity, our depression, even our rebellion.

See God's fingerprints? Maybe not a prison escape, or a miraculous healing, or someone saved. How about a diminishing love for a particular sin? How about a son or daughter's renewed interest in God? How about your husband's increased attentiveness? Or your family's deepening dependency on God? How about a former enemy's kind gesture? How about your new sensitivity to the pain of others? Do you see His fingerprints?

**Concl:**

No doubt, it irritates some of you to stare at Paul and Silas' open cell doors while yours remain bolted and locked. Where's the healing you prayed for, the forgiveness of someone, the large check that's never come in the mail, no call back from the job interview, no change in your husband's attitude? Why did Paul and Silas get *their* answer? They probably didn't. I don't think they were praying to be set free. Had they been, I think they would have run once they had the chance? Peter did when he could in Acts 12. Probably they were praying simply to bring glory to God. READ 2 Cor.12:9b.