



A Five-Day Devotional Journey

June 28 - July 5, 2009

Prison Song

1 And then we came to Rome

Read. Acts 28:14-16, 30-31 *Message*

And then we came to Rome. Friends in Rome heard we were on the way and came out to meet us. One group got as far as Appian Court; another group met us at Three Taverns—emotion-packed meetings, as you can well imagine. Paul, brimming over with praise, led us in prayers of thanksgiving. When we actually entered Rome, they let Paul live in his own private quarters with a soldier who had been assigned to guard him....

Paul lived for two years in his rented house. He welcomed everyone who came to visit. He urgently presented all matters of the kingdom of God. He explained everything about Jesus Christ.

His door was always open.

Think.

- What has been your own personal Rome? When have you found yourself confined by circumstances or conditions beyond your control? How did you handle the experience?
- What aspects of Paul’s two years in Rome awaiting his hearing before Emperor Nero sound confining and claustrophobic to you? In what ways did he experience freedom?
- “If I only didn’t have to deal with _____ I could really be happy and free.” How would you fill in the blank? What life conditions or situations are you currently facing that you just wish would go away so you could have some peace?

Pray.

Father, give me a heart that brims over with praise even in the midst of delay and disappointment. Open my mouth to sing a new song even in the midst of the same old routines, facing the same old walls. Show me how to be free even while imprisoned by life.

Live.

Try this mental exercise. Imagine whatever “prison walls” you are currently facing, and then watch yourself painting “Jesus-graffiti” all over them. Celebrate your freedom in Jesus today.

I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don’t wanna know. Some things are best left unsaid.

I’d like to think they were singing about something so beautiful that it can’t be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it.

I tell you, those voices soared, higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away.

And for the briefest of moments every last man at Shawshank felt free.

“Red” Redding from *The Shawshank Redemption*

It’s a central scene in the film *The Shawshank Redemption*. The main character, Andy Dufresne, imprisoned for two murders he didn’t commit, seizes the opportunity to broadcast the soaring “Letter Duet” from Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro* across the prison yard. The scene vividly captures what some identify as the key theme of the story: how we can be free, even in prison, or captive even in freedom, depending on your outlook.

Four of the apostle Paul’s 13 letters (or 14, depending on who’s counting) in the New Testament are grouped together under the title *prison epistles*: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Most scholars place these four letters during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome — an imprisonment that Luke describes as something more of a “house arrest” in Acts 28. Luke concludes his history of the early church with Paul in a “rented house” in Rome under Roman guard, freely able to receive visitors and to dictate these letters. And while he may not have been confined in a dungeon, he was still chained to a guard and his life was seemingly on hold as he awaited his day before the emperor.

And yet these letters reveal a voice that soars. As during an earlier imprisonment in Philippi, Paul sang out in his confinement, truly free even while gripped by chains. It’s significant that when addressing believers in that same city of Philippi while once again in confinement, he says they are saints *in Christ at Philippi*. *In* and *at*. Being *at Philippi* may or may not be a cause for rejoicing; being *in Christ* is the ground of joy, inspiring a song of soul and spirit that can’t be taken from you, no matter where you may be *at*.

2 Making music to the Lord in your hearts

Read. Ephesians 5:15-20 *NLT*

Be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do. Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts. And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Think.

- Make a list of the instructions Paul gives here in rapid succession. Which one do you find most challenging? Which do you find yourself most naturally fulfilling?
- What's Paul's rationale for not being "drunk with wine"? What does he hold out in its place?
- What does it mean for you to "make music to the Lord in your heart"? How essential is musical skill in caring out this charge?
- To whom do you sing? What is your song?

Pray.

Lord, set my spirit free to truly celebrate you and the life that I have found in you. Teach me fresh lyrics, and release me to move in your harmonies.

Live.

Identify the brand of "wine" you've been numbing yourself with lately, and clear out the bottles. Find a way to sing, to really sing out your praises to God for his presence in your life.

4 Sing your hearts out to God!

Read. Colossians 3:15-17 *Message*

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.

Think.

- What does Paul see as the key to being in tune and staying in step with others? To what extent do you hear harmonizing melodies (as opposed to screeching noise) in your relationships at church? at work? at home? If it is screeching that you hear, how can you introduce a new song?
- How are you doing at "cultivating thankfulness"? How often do you find yourself thanking God and others as opposed to finding fault or complaining to or about others (or God)?
- How can you more aggressively let the Word of Christ "have the run" of your house and life?

Pray.

Jesus, sweep over me with your peace; wash away my griping, complaining and grudging ways and leave behind the inviting fragrance of gratitude and thanksgiving.

Live.

Keep a mental tab of the number of times today you actually say, "Thank you."

3 His most excellent harmonies

Read. Philippians 4:4-9 *Message*

Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.

Think.

- How dominated is your life by worries and anxieties? Which worry is looming the largest before you right now? What steps can you take to personally implement Paul's teaching in this passage?

Pray.

Holy Spirit, show me how to shape my worries in prayers. Let your presence and trust in you displace anxiety in the center of my life.

Live.

Reread this passage throughout the day — aloud, slowly.

5 You refreshed the hearts of the saints

Read. Philemon 1:4-7 *NIV*

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

Think.

- What was it about Philemon's life that brought so much joy and encouragement to Paul?
- Who has been a Philemon in your life recently? How did this person refresh and encourage you? Have you told this person just how he/she has blessed you?
- For whom can you be a Philemon right now? Whose heart can you refresh?
- What benefit does Paul identify as coming from being "active in sharing our faith"? What does "sharing your faith" mean to you? Is this something you look forward to or that you dread? Why?

Pray.

Father, make me authentically refreshing to others — a refresher of hearts and souls, rather than a drainer of spirit. Teach me the prison song that Paul is singing in these letters. Let my voice and heart soar — especially in the gray places of this world.

Live.

Refresh someone's heart today.