

Guilty

Some face trouble seemingly for no reason at all, like a child battling leukemia, or a pedestrian who is hit by a drunk driver whose car jumps the curb. Countless examples can be given. Other times, we face misery because of our own doing; the direct result of our sinful choices. In other words, sometimes we suffer because we're guilty. This essay aims to bring hope to those facing affliction who have brought misery upon themselves, because they sinned.

Psalm 107:10–16, ***“There were those who dwelt in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in misery and chains, because they had rebelled against the words of God and spurned the counsel of the Most High. Therefore He humbled their heart with labor; they stumbled and there was none to help. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble; He saved them out of their distresses. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death and broke their bands apart. Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness, and for His wonders to the sons of men! For He has shattered gates of bronze and cut bars of iron asunder.”***

The Psalmist is here speaking about people in prison, people who ought to be in prison, because they rebelled against God. They are guilty, having rebelled against the commands of the Lord, and spurned (meaning, despised) His counsel. They broke His law, and for that God saw fit to have them put in chains. As prisoners they ***“dwelt in darkness and in the shadow of death.”*** This described their physical circumstances as well as their frame of mind. They were physically in chains, put in the dark jail, and their hearts feared that death could come upon them at any time. Yet, despite these circumstances, and despite these inmates knowing full well that they were guilty, their misery wasn't severe enough to compel them to bow their hearts to the Lord. They remained inwardly rebellious and stiff-necked toward God. Have you ever met anyone like that, despite the trouble they've created for themselves, they can't seem to turn to the Lord in a spirit of humility?

God is so good though! He doesn't allow these prisoners to remain in their condition of separation from Him; their spiritual separation. God brought more hardship upon them, knowing that this is what was necessary to break them of their self-centeredness. Verse twelve says, ***“Therefore He humbled their heart with labor.”*** Prison wasn't enough. Chains weren't enough. Being in the shadow of death wasn't enough. So, in an act of tough-love, God subjects them to hard labor. What was this labor? Maybe busting rocks, or digging holes in the hot sun. Whatever it was, the added burden was impactful; ***“they stumbled and there was none to help.”*** As a result of this added burden, the hearts of the guilty had finally been humbled and, ***“Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble.”***

God had ordained their imprisonment and He had ordained the extra labor. This means that God had orchestrated that these guilty people were to get caught, tried in a court, and sentenced to both the prison and to the hard labor that followed. God has historically used the government as a tool to exercise His justice in the lives of men. This happens still. Justice is part of what a loving God does. The Lord wasn't sitting in heaven looking down on these prisoners and smiling in delight as they labored in fear and trembling. God is not some mean bully who delights in our suffering. Nor was God sitting in heaven looking down on these prisoners and thinking how mean the government was for treating them this way. Instead, He's the loving Creator who saw the greater value in their temporary suffering. That greater value is what resulted in the hearts and lives of these particular prisoners. ***“He saved them out of their distresses. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death and broke their bands apart.”***

Just like the Israelites who were enslaved in Egypt for centuries, who were unwilling to bend to the Lord, until eventually they cried out in their distress. In our humility, we find deliverance. It's far better to be subjected to extreme hardship if the result is that we turn in faith and enjoy an eternity with the Lord. A relationship with Christ doesn't just ensure our eternity in heaven, He also provides an earthly life that's full of significance and purpose, whether in or out of jail.

Some inmates give in to bitterness and self-pity; they refuse to entrust themselves to Jesus. Their time in jail can be their ruin. This type of response is unnecessary and completely avoidable. Regarding the inmates we read about in Psalm 107, we don't know how long God left them in jail. What we know is that He knew they were there, He saw them

continuously, He heard their cry, and He delivered them. They experienced a spiritual deliverance above all else. Their hearts were full of praise, giving thanks ***“for His lovingkindness, and for His wonders.”*** They were filled with gratitude that God would dispense such love and mercy to guilty sinners. Additionally, they thanked God that He was powerful enough to provide a physical deliverance, ***“For He has shattered gates of bronze and cut bars of iron asunder.”***

Psalm 107 certainly isn't a promise that God will provide physical deliverance (i.e. legal freedom) to all who entrust themselves to Him. Otherwise, inmates everywhere would pursue Jesus with a false motivation. I think the point of this passage is that inmates can make one of two choices when in jail. They can either wrongly fixate on God, accusing Him of being the source of their circumstances; ignoring their own responsibility, and remaining spiritually rebellious. Or, they can rightly fixate on God as the source of their hope; owning their guilt and seeking real deliverance. Freedom on the inside is far more satisfying than freedom on the outside!