

## OPENER

### **Story Prompt:**

*Horatio stares out into the ocean, stars reflecting off the calm surface. "This is the spot," he hears the captain say over his shoulder. Horatio doesn't reply. In his hand is a crumpled telegram. Horatio has read it over and over for what feels like a thousand times.*

*Just days prior, Horatio had loaded his wife and four daughters onto a French ocean liner bound for a much needed vacation. They had lost nearly everything in the disastrous Chicago fire of 1871, and life had been hard work for the Spafford family for the last two years. At the last minute, overloaded with responsibilities, Horatio decided to stay behind.*

*In the middle of the night during the crossing, the ship struck another vessel, broke in half, and sank in minutes. Horatio's wife, Anna, was found unconscious, floating on a plank from the ship.*

*His daughters were not so fortunate. All four perished in the chaos.*

*When Anna arrived in Wales with the other survivors, she got word to Horatio by telegram. In agony, she only wrote...*

*"Saved alone. What shall I do?"*

*It is this same telegram that Horatio holds in his hand this dark night. He had dropped everything and left the next day. As they passed by the spot where the ship sank, he read those words once more.*

*"What shall I do?"*

**(Wikipedia, edited 1/16/2024A)**

### **What do you do when (like Horatio) your world stops?**

We all like to imagine how we might react. But, can anything truly prepare us for those moments?

**C. S. Lewis**, beloved author of the Narnia children's book series, wrote this in a book called ***A Grief Observed*** after the loss of his wife:

**“We were promised suffering. They were part of the program. We were even told, ‘Blessed are they that mourn,’ and I accept it. I’ve got nothing that I hadn’t bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not imagination.”**

**(Lewis, 1961)**

Like Lewis, many of us might imagine how to react in the face of trials. But, our perspective can only truly be defined by going through them. And, our response reveals a lot about us, too.

**Do we take heart, or as so many do, lose heart?**

Some of us struggle to reconcile God’s goodness with the hardships we face.

For others, it’s hard to believe God will be present in, as *(both)* the Psalmist *(and the rapper, Coolio)* put it, the “valley of the shadow of death.” Why would God allow us to go through these things? Is this some kind of test to prove our mettle?

Lewis continues, later in the book:

**“God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love to determine their quality. He knew them already. It was I who didn’t.”**

**We learn much about ourselves, our faith, and our level of trust in God in our midnights of the soul.**

For the next month, we’ll be looking at some stories in Scripture that took place at **Midnight**, and see what it can teach us about our darkest moments.

Because, we believe...

**In your darkest moments, God is still with you, and working for your good.**

In a verse from the book of John, Jesus is preparing His disciples for what is about to take place. Jesus is about to be led away to be crucified, the disciples will be scattered, and eventually, be persecuted.

According to early church historians, many would even be put to death. And yet, these are some of Jesus’ last words to them before His death:

**“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” -John 16:33**

***Aside:** “Pastor, what does it take to overcome the world? What’s the secret? Can we really find peace in trial? Is this kind of peace even possible anymore?”*

**Reset Moment** *(maybe have a time of prayer):*

*Specifically thank Jesus for being our Prince of Peace and always walking with us, even in the valley of the shadow of death.*

## SET-UP

### Reset Moment:

*What can help us be resilient in the face of struggle?*

*According to the American Psychological Association (2020),*

*“Psychologists define resilience as the process of **adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress**—such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors.*

*As much as resilience involves ‘bouncing back’ from these difficult experiences, it can also involve profound personal growth.*

*While these adverse events, much like rough river waters, are certainly painful and difficult, they don’t have to determine the outcome of your life. There are many aspects of your life you can control, modify, and grow with.*

*That’s the role of resilience. Becoming more resilient not only helps you get through difficult circumstances, it also empowers you to grow and even improve your life along the way.” (Contributors, updated 2/1/2020)*

Modern psychology confirms what C.S. Lewis discovered to be true – these difficult and traumatic life events we navigate have the power to redefine our lives.

But, long before Lewis put pen to paper, Paul wrote this to another early group of Jesus followers:

**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. –Romans 8:28**

There is potential for good to come out of every bad moment. Even in our **Midnights**, God is bringing light to the darkness.

*Aside: “But how? It’s one thing to read it in the Bible, Pastor, but another thing entirely to believe it and live it.”*

These are not just words to Paul. Paul knows these are true because he suffered many difficult seasons in his life:

**<sup>24</sup> Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, <sup>26</sup> I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. <sup>27</sup> I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. –2 Corinthians 11:24-27**

Paul knows better than just about anyone what hardship is like. And yet, Paul still finds joy, contentment, and fulfillment. Because, Paul knows that...

**In our Midnights, there is a simple secret to finding peace.**

*Aside: "Pastor, that sounds too much like click bait! That's the kind of thing you hear wannabe theologians say on TikTok, Reels, and Facebook."*

As incredible as it may sound, there is a simple answer.

*Aside: Now, to be clear, simple is not the same thing as easy, quick, or painless. Simple just means that God has laid it out for us clearly and plainly, if we will obey.*

Paul wrote the book of Philippians while in prison. *(He wrote several books of the Bible in prison!)* While chained and under house arrest overseen by Caesar's Praetorian Guard, he writes this letter to encourage his fellow followers of Jesus.

Toward the end of his letter, he writes:

**I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.-Philippians 4:12**

So, if there is a secret – what is it?

It turns out this was far from the first time Paul was thrown into prison. Let's learn from another instance that we find in the pages of the book of Acts.

## STORY

The Book of Acts tells the story of the early church, starting from the time Jesus ascends to heaven. Much of the second half of the book concerns Paul going from town to town sharing about Jesus.

While they are in Philippi (*the town to which he would later write the book of Philippians*), they encounter a young, enslaved girl who has an evil spirit that allows her to predict the future.

In the name of Jesus, Paul is able to exorcize the demon and heal the young woman, but the girl's owners are livid that their source of income has dried up.

Luke, the author of Acts, remembers,

**<sup>19</sup>When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. –Acts 16:19**

What's worse, the owners incite a riot and enforce mob justice against Paul and his traveling companion, Silas:

**<sup>22</sup>The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup>After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. <sup>24</sup>When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. –Acts 16:22-24**

What happens to Paul is certainly unjust. In delivering this young woman from her demonic oppressors, his reward is to be publicly humiliated, beaten, and locked up in prison.

**In our Midnights of the soul, do we ever get locked up in prisons of self-pity?**

Do we ever find ourselves wishing for what we think we deserve? After all, so many times tragedy is forced upon us, and it doesn't seem fair or just.

*(If you used the Story Prompt above) Just like Horatio Spafford, we find ourselves lost, confused, asking, "What shall I do?"*

Yet, we don't see Paul do this. In fact, quite the opposite. In that Philippian letter, Paul displays great perspective on what matters most:

**8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him... -Philippians 3:8-9a**

For Paul, even though he suffers loss, hardship, shipwreck, imprisonment, hatred, violence, injustice, and eventually martyrdom, his eternal focus allows him to endure the temporary pains and struggles he encounters.

After being thrown in prison, Paul and Silas spend the evening in an unusual and unexpected way:

**About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. -Acts 16:25**

*Aside: What comes to your mind when you think of prison?*

For Roman prisoners, jail is not something that was designed to spend a lot of time in. These prisons are underground, typically cramped, poorly ventilated, and disgustingly filthy.

Sometimes dozens, or even hundreds, of people are crammed into communal holding cells, depending on the size. What's worse, it is up to your family or friends to supply your food and water.

These prisons are designed to psychologically torture people into confessing while awaiting trial. They are places of torment. Imagine Paul and Silas being led past row after row of criminals being held until they broke mentally.

So, for them to walk into this scenario and begin praying and singing praise songs is very odd for the other prisoners to hear. What happens next is even more unexpected!

**26 Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. -Acts 16:26**

Now, you may think that there is a mass prison break and everyone bolts out of there. But, the prisoners are so taken with Paul and Silas that even though they could have easily gotten away, they didn't. Here's how Luke remembers it:

**<sup>27</sup>The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup>But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" <sup>29</sup>The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup>He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" –Acts 16:27-30**

For this jailer, it's entirely likely that he means physical salvation. He sees the prisoners unchained and thinks he has a prison revolt on his hands.

The word **saved | sozo** | in Greek is best understood as **to rescue from danger**. But, is also the same word Paul uses to signify spiritual rescue. **(Mounce, 2011)**

Shaking with fear, he asks what he has to do to be delivered from the horde of angry, mentally broken men inside. Instead of negotiating or bargaining for freedom, Paul and Silas respond to his question by reframing it.

**<sup>31</sup>They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." –Acts 16:31**

This shift in perspective changes the Philippian jailer's life in more than one way. In an instant, at **Midnight**, he thinks his life is over when he wakes to the unchained mob at the door. But, Paul and Silas point him to God's greater purposes, and he becomes a follower of Jesus as a result.

**In our Midnights, what can we do to change our perspective?**

Paul and Silas show us the way, just as they were able to lead others to it, too.



## STEPS

### Reset Moment:

*Even though Paul is just beginning to win converts and build a church in Philippi, the Philippian church holds on to this **Midnight** moment as a core memory of God's miraculous presence in dark and difficult times.*

*Years later when they receive a letter from Paul, knowing he is imprisoned in Rome, they also know full well the weight of what Paul is feeling. But, they also know that Paul holds a heavenly perspective even in pain, weakness, and struggle.*

Paul and Silas show us God's way to reframe our focus in verse 25:

**<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.  
—Acts 16:25**

***Aside: It sounds too good to be true, right?***

There are two simple things that have power in the supernatural to break chains and bring our focus back to God's higher perspective.

**In your midnight, pray through it and praise through it.**

In that letter to the Philippians, Paul confirms the power of these two ancient practices again:

**<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>6</sup> Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. —Philippians 4:4,6-7**

First,

**1. Pray through your Midnight moments.**

When you find yourself at midnight, take a moment to express your fears to God. It doesn't always change the circumstances, but it can change us.

Paul knows that God does not promise an instant fix to our pains and problems, but He does promise His presence in the midst of them.

This shift in perspective equips us to face our darkest moments. In these moments of connection with God, we are reminded that we are not alone in our struggles.

So, when you are locked up in chains in this life (*in your thoughts, emotions, circumstances, finances, whatever*), remember the power of prayer.

Prayer is a tool that reframes our focus, brings light into our darkness, and unlocks a peace that surpasses all understanding.

*Aside: If you are new to prayer, or aren't sure what to say to God, that's okay! You're in good company. Even Paul himself admits in his letter to the Romans:*

**In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us. – Romans 8:26**

A great place to start is God's promises of peace. Read through verses like **John 14:27**, **Isaiah 26:3**, and **Psalms 145:18**. Thank God for His presence, and ask Him to help focus your thoughts on Him and set your soul free.

#### **Reset Moment:**

*To help you start seeing things God's way, here is [Midnights Gadget](#) - [insert specific instructions on how to access Light for the Midnight + Social Posts + Text Sequence]  
\*See [series gadget folder](#) for resources and tips on how to make, share and use Light for the Midnight.*

Second,

#### **2. Praise through your Midnight moments.**

If you're new to church, you may think of worship as "what we do on Sunday," or a church word for "singing." There's a deeper dimension to worship that has the power to break the chains of grief and heaviness off our souls.

Many amazing stories in the Bible speak of the power of worship as a weapon in the supernatural.

King David's quiet worship is able to drive evil spirits away. (**1 Samuel 16:14-23**)

Another king, named Jehoshaphat, puts singers at the head of his army, and they win the battle without swinging a sword or firing the first arrow. (**2 Chronicles 20:15-30**)

And, in the story of Paul and Silas that we are reading today, it says this:

**Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose.**

**—Acts 16:26**

**Worship has the power to open prison doors and break chains.**

It has the power to lift off spiritual weight. It's the unique, transcendent experience of celebrating God for who He is and how much He loves us. And, even in our struggle, we can thank God that He gives us the gift of His presence and peace.

## **SEND OUT**

Let's return, one last time, to the deck of that ocean liner...

**Story:**

*Horatio Spafford stands on the deck of the ship, holding the telegram in his hand. "What shall I do?"*

*In the midst of agony, in his own personal midnight, staring off into the quiet waters, he follows the same ancient practices of Paul. He returns to his stateroom, and on a piece of hotel stationery he has stashed in his bag, he pours out his heart in worship and prayer.*

*Display on screens as you read:*

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/images/ac0008s.jpg>

*Today we have it as a beloved hymn that's often sung at funerals, giving strength to others in their midnights, too.*

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll,  
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

**What promise is God inviting you to meditate and pray through?**

**What darkness is God calling you to drive away with your worship?**

## GOSPEL

In the story of a jail in the city of Phillippi, and a letter Paul sends to the church in that city, Paul reminds the Philippian believers about Jesus' purpose in coming to earth:

**He made himself nothing by taking on the nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! – Philippians 2:7-8**

The most profound act of Jesus is His choice to suffer and die. Through this act, Jesus takes upon Himself all the mistakes of all humanity. He does this out of love, to bridge the gap that our imperfections create between us and a perfect, loving Creator.

But there's Good News! The story doesn't end there! Jesus destroys the power of death over us by rising from the dead three days later.

So, what does this mean for us today? It invites us to respond. The first step is acknowledging our own imperfections and mistakes. We all have them, and they separate us from God, and lead to spiritual death.

The next step is to believe – to trust that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are for us, too. It's believing that through Him, we can find forgiveness, healing, and a new start.

Finally, this journey involves following Jesus as Lord. By following the example He set, our lives are transformed. It's about striving to embody love, kindness, and humility in our daily lives, guided by Jesus' teaching.

So today, Jesus is calling you to start this new life with him. If you're ready, let's pray together. Today is the day for you to be set free by Him.

### Prayer

[ Give action steps for your church, i.e. raise hands, come forward for prayer, communication cards, etc. ]

## GENEROSITY

### Global Partner

**Story Prompt:**

*Share a story or video of a global partner who is helping people find freedom and peace by being set free through the beliefs and actions of other believers who are living out the Gospel, just like Paul and Silas.*

Check out our [Generosity Partner Video Guidelines](#)

[ Give action steps for your church, i.e. passing buckets, bins in the back or lobby, online giving, etc. ]

For those who are already giving generously, thank you! Because of your generosity, [ Church name ] will continue giving people hope, setting them free, and making a difference around the world, and around the corner.