

LIFE GROUP LESSON

When God Moves • Week of July 2

Introduction

One of the most important goals in the minds of our forefathers during the formation of these United States was to ensure the freedom to worship. James Madison wrote the Declaration of Rights in 1776 one month before the signing of the Declaration of Independence:

“That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence, and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience; and that is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity towards each other.”

How wonderful to be free ‘to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity towards each other’ and give back to our Creator what is due Him – our honor and worship. But is this the way we live? Do we even know how to value this freedom? The world defines freedom as the ‘power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint’ ... and yet, in our human nature – acting, speaking, thinking anyway we want – can be very self-serving. What is the greater, more overarching goal of freedom? How do you define freedom?

Since the beginning, the Lord gives humankind the gift of ‘free will.’ Yet, the gift of free will is somewhat of an enigma. As individuals and a people, we have the freedom to choose the wrong things. Each day we exercise our right to choose behaviors and attitudes. Whether public or private in the unseen places of mind and heart, poor choices can become our undoing, as individuals and overtime and as a nation. Thus, there is no doubt we stand in need of a strength and wisdom from beyond ourselves. We stand in need of love, forgiveness, and forbearance – which *ultimately* comes from God. When Christ is honored, God’s Spirit and Wisdom show up. When the Lord is dishonored, God’s Spirit is grieved.

How can we as people of God *stop* grieving the Holy Spirit? How can we instead begin to align our mind and actions with the heart of God? Perhaps some of the first proactive steps we can take is to begin to seek the heart of our Lord: (1) Pray as we are instructed in 2 Chronicles 7:14; (2) Return to the mandate of the Christ’s commission as spoken in Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 24:44-49 and Acts 1:8; and (3) Begin to persistently seek the heart of God in every area of our lives. God hears our prayers; when we pray, God moves. We can ask the Lord to begin to renew our minds (Romans 12:1-2) and think about things that honor Him (Philippians 4:8).

Background

God desires “everyone to be saved and to understand the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). As the apostle Paul wrote these words to Timothy in his old age, Paul had faithfully preached the message that ‘God sent His Son, Jesus, into this world to reconcile humanity with God.’ When Jesus met Saul on the road to persecute *followers of the Way* (Acts 9) the risen Jesus redirected Saul’s life in a dramatic way. Saul became known as Paul and began to understand personally the truth that he would later preach and write: that Jesus Christ “gave his life to purchase our freedom” (1 Timothy 2:5-6). Paul began to see that ‘God has made Christ to become wisdom itself,’ words penned in 1 Corinthians 1:30. In every letter, Paul writes as a changed man whose heart, mind, direction and mission reflect new citizenship (see Philippians 3:20-21). Though Paul wrote many of his letters while in chains, Paul was free. Jesus said: “... if the Son sets you free, you are truly free” (John 8:36). Think about it: if we as individuals and a nation, want to live as free citizens, here and beyond, it is imperative that we know the risen Lord Jesus Christ personally, as Paul did, and honor Him in every area of our independence.

After returning from his first missionary journey with Barnabas, Paul wants to go back and visit each city where they had previously preached the Gospel. But Barnabas does not accompany Paul on the second trip (see Acts 15:36-40). Paul chooses a man named Silas. Believers in Antioch entrust them to the Lord’s care and they began to travel throughout Syria and Cilicia. Though Paul’s and Silas’ desire is to be faithful to the Lord, in city after city, they are met with obstacles and persecution. On the night Paul, Silas, and their team finally reach the seaport of Troas (having been prevented by the Holy Spirit from going into the province of Asia and the Bithynia) Paul has a vision. He sees a man in northern Greece pleading for help.

Read Acts 16:9-34

1. What is the Holy Spirit saying to you?

Notice how the Lord is already at work in the lives of each of the individuals in these encounters and how God’s Spirit shows up in the most unlikely places. Notice how the individuals highlighted in this account are very different. Lydia is a wealthy woman from Thyatira. A merchant of expensive purple cloth, the Lord opens her heart to receive Paul’s message and she wants to host Paul and his mission team. Notice Lydia owns her own home; yet the next person Paul encounters is a slave girl who is owned by someone, a ‘master’ who uses her ability to tell fortunes to earn him money. The spirit within her recognizes the risen Jesus alive in Paul, Silas and their traveling companions. Once Paul commands the demonic spirit to come out of the girl, they are mobbed, beaten and imprisoned. How do Paul and Silas respond? They begin praying and singing hymns to God around midnight.

2. What are you going to do about what the Holy Spirit is speaking to you?

Paul, former persecutor of Christians, is now being persecuted. This was the word spoken over Paul by Jesus in Acts 9:15-16: "Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake." Suffering is part of the journey of faith and obedience. When God is on the move, we move with him. We also suffer with him. Paul's and Silas' reaction to the severe beating, chains and imprisonment is to praise God! – and as they did, other prisoners are listening. When we choose to praise our Lord in the midst of pain and suffering, He shows up.

3. How can we help you?

We should encourage one another to keep praising God no matter what our circumstances look like. This is hard but that is when God often shows up. As the earthquake rattles the foundations of the prison to the point that all the doors fly open, Paul, Silas and the other prisoners don't leave. Paul shouts to the jailer that everyone is present and accounted for, keeping the jailer from taking his own life. The jailer calls for the lights and asks: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas share the word of the Lord with him *and* his household. They all believe and are immediately baptized! When God moves, the whole scene changes. Do you praise God in the middle of suffering? Your resolve to honor the Lord in life's challenges may be the very way the hardest, most indifferent person, comes to believe in Christ. The jailer begins to wash and care for Paul's and Silas' wounds, and then set a meal before them. When God shows up, a night of pain and suffering is turned to rejoicing.

In Closing—

Our nation is in need of prayer. Freedom is not free. The most enslaving force of our existence is sin and self. Christ came to set us free from ourselves, and from sin and death. Christ died for all so God's grace is for all. Our greatest need is the need to be forgiven and set free from slavery to sin – and that is what Jesus came to do! We are weak and we will suffer; but the Lord is made strong in our weakness. As a nation, we thank the Lord for freedom we enjoy, yes! ... but on Independence Day, let us remember that we are interdependent on one another and our ultimate dependence is on our loving Lord and Savior who gave His life for our freedom.

Read together what the psalmist declares:

"What joy for the nation whose God is the LORD, whose people he has chosen as his inheritance. The LORD looks down from heaven and sees the whole human race. From his throne he observes all who live on earth. He made their hearts, so he understands everything they do. The best-equipped army cannot save a king, nor is great strength enough to save a warrior. Don't count on your warhorse to give you victory—for all its strength, it cannot save you. But the LORD watches over those who fear him, those who rely on his unfailing love. He rescues them from death and keeps them alive in times of famine. We put our hope in the LORD. He is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. Let your unfailing love surround us, LORD, for our hope is in you alone" (Psalm 33:12-22).

when GOD *moves*

Text: Acts 16:13-34

PLAIN TRUTH

God moves to set us _____, so we should freely _____ Jesus who can set us free from _____ captivity.

1. Christ _____ for _____. So God's _____ is for _____.

2. Though our _____ may vary, God's grace meets our _____.

- a. Lydia was already spiritually open.**
- b. The Slave Girl was too antagonistic to ever come to church.**
- c. The jailer was too comfortable and unmotivated to come church.**

3. Jesus is still building his _____ through _____ lives.

July 2, 2023