

The Shelter in Place Virtuous Cycle

Shelter Week 3: Acts 16:23-34

5/3/20

Welcome/intro

If you're new, this is Week 3 of a series we've really enjoyed around here called Shelter

We're many weeks now into the sheltered in place experience and for just about all of us this is a marathon

and if you've ever run a marathon or known someone who has there's two parts: the physical training—that's important

but an even bigger part is the psychological and mental part, to keep pressing through when you hit the wall

And so what we're doing in this series is equip all of us with that mental and psychological and spiritual strength to run this shelter-in-place marathon together

Throughout the Bible there are all kinds of stories of people who find themselves in confined spaces, often under duress or against their will

And yet even in the pain and difficulty of these situations many have profound encounters with God

And we believe that for some of us, maybe many of us, that's the story we're going to tell after this is all over

So we've been looking at several different stories about how God meets people while sheltered in place and we're looking at it from two different angles

One: is there anything that we can learn from what these people *do* that helps them to thrive in the midst of a shelter-in-place kind of a situation?

Are there some 'best practices' that help us to navigate these types of situations and most importantly meet God

And two: are there some signature ways that God seems to move or act to meet people that we can be awake to during our Coronavirus, shelter-in-place marathon? Because we don't want to miss it!

And in the story we're going to look at today, we're going to get some coaching on how we might break out of vicious cycles and instead get caught up in a more healthy and life-giving virtuous cycle of God's movement while sheltered in place

A vicious cycle is a sequenced pattern of thought or action that leads you down a path that is predictably frustrating or counter-productive or not the life or situation you want and yet you find yourself repeating it over and over again

If you've ever battled an addiction or known someone else who has, that of course is a very obvious vicious cycle

But it could be you're having the exact same unhelpful conversation with your spouse or the exact same conflict with your kids over and over again

Or it could be more internal--it could be a pattern of self-defeating thoughts or self-defeating behaviors that spiral you into isolation or depression or into being overly aggressive and proud or resentful

And one of the things that just might be happening to many of us is this whole experience is putting pressures on us and on the relationships around us that are pushing you into these habituated vicious cycles of relating and behaving that are not life-giving for you or for the people around you.

Today, we're going to see if we can break out of the vicious cycle by replacing it with God's virtuous cycle of creative and life-giving energies into our own hearts and minds and homes and our relationships

Today we're in the New Testament book of Acts, if you're new to the Bible, so glad you're here, that's A.C.T.S, short for Acts of the Apostles

The story of how the followers of Jesus after his death and resurrection fanned across the ancient Mediterranean region starting churches and spreading the good news

And where we're picking up in Acts chapter 16, it's been several years now since the death and resurrection of Jesus

And two men, Paul and Silas, are traveling around starting churches and they experience two things just about everywhere they go:

1. They see people come to faith in Jesus at an extraordinary rate everywhere they go
2. They experience opposition just about everywhere they go

And in Acts 16, Paul and Silas are in a city called Philippi and there they come across a slave who has a spirit whereby she could tell the future and her handlers make a lot of money with her abilities

She comes across Paul and Silas and declares that they're servants of the most High God, declaring the way of salvation

Which is pretty good press from a demonic spirit when you can get it!

But it happened for several days and eventually Paul gets fed up with this loud spirit and casts the spirit out of her

And her handlers realize they've just lost their income stream, so they take Paul and Silas to the local magistrates

and rather than merely complain that they can no longer use this poor slave girl to make themselves money they play the race card

They say that these Jewish men advocating foreign customs unlawful for us good Romans to practice, and the magistrates order them stripped and severely beaten and flogged with rods

A terrible, cruel, and often very public and humiliating experience

And then they get thrown them in jail, that's their shelter-in-place experience, and that's where we're going to meet them as we pick up the story—Acts 16:23-25

23 After they [Paul and Silas] had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. 24 When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were _____

And now it's time to play one of our favorite games here at Chatham Community Church, Bible Mad-Libs!

Paul and Silas have just been arrested and beaten severely FOR DOING GOOD! They've just freed a woman from a demonic spirit!

To the cynic this is yet more proof of the old adage that no good deed goes unpunished

They've thrown into a dungeon, the inner cell, under extremely close guard

And now it's midnight and in the ancient world, that's literally the middle of the night the time when things were darkest and the daylight was the furthest away

because without electricity their rhythms were much more tied to sunrise and sunset

And at that darkest point, what do you think they're doing in this blank? I tell you what I would be doing if it were me: I'd be **COMPLAINING!**

And I don't mean to brag, but I'm pretty good at it! I might be what you would call a gifted complainer!

And because I'm a Jesus person, the place where my complaint would have been lodged if I were Paul or Silas would have been in prayer:

"God, how could you let this happen? I'm doing what you told me to do, why didn't you protect me? I've got things to do, places to go, churches to start, get me out of here!"

That's one of my own spiritual vicious cycles:

It starts with some sort of painful experience, I respond by complaining to God

Which leads to feeling sorry for myself, which leads to deeper feelings of entitlement and sometimes even resentment

And before you know it, I'm self-righteous and grumpy at God and it eeks out at the people all around me—isn't that a pleasant picture?

Now to help us enter into the passage a little bit, let's put the experience of Paula and Silas in our context

Over the past six weeks or so, as we've all been put into this shelter-in-place experience we've had our own darkest moments:

frustration, boredom, loneliness, restlessness, anxiety, fear for your health or someone else's health that you love

So let's adjust our Mad Lib for today:

"In my darkest moments over the past few weeks I've _____"

Maybe you're also a gifted **complained** to God or to anyone who would listen

Or maybe you've just sat around and **worried and battled the voices in your head**

Or maybe you've found any number of ways to try to **escape through distraction**

t.v, movies, shopping online, picking up hobbies or gardening or exercise

or maybe you've resorted to the excessive use of alcohol, drugs, pornography

viewership has skyrocketed during this time

Or maybe you're the opposite and when things get dark you've **dug in and worked harder**

Some of us like to rise up to a challenge and see if we can beat it

Or maybe in your darkest moments over the past few weeks you've **lashed out at the people around you**

Some of these responses in moderation could be healthy, others are innately counter-productive

But all of them only offer temporary relief from the challenges of this season

and for many of us our first response in those dark moments is our first step into our own habituated vicious cycles

If you and I were sitting a coffee shop, I'd pull out a pen and a napkin and sketch this out for you, let me instead put this up on the screen and see if this might resonate

The vicious cycle looks something like this:

S-I-P pressures -> leads to

Unhealthy Response: could be just internally in terms of how we're thinking about it

Or it could be both internal AND external in terms of how we relate to the people or things around us

One of the things we say a good bit around here is this: **(Do not complicate a hard situation with a bad decision)**

Shelter in place, for most of us, that's a hard situation.

If at points over the past 6 weeks you've felt stressed, overwhelmed, bored, restless, losing your job, worried about your money, worried about a sick family member, that's a hard situation

But no matter how bad your situation is, If you make a bad decision, all you've done is complicate your very hard situation with a bad decision

The vast majority of those bad decisions are what the Scriptures call this sin and the result is...

→ **Broken Relationships:** we snipe at the kids or the spouse and we insert brokenness and fragmentation into the relationship

if we turn to alcohol or other substances or pornography or gambling or other addictive behaviors we can end up with a distorted relationship with those

and most importantly when we engage in unhealthy responses we put up obstacles between ourselves and God who is the source and fountain of life-giving energies-- we lose God's grace and strength that we so desperately need to run this race

→ **Isolation:** some of us feel the weight of guilt and shame when we've engaged in unhealthy responses, so we feel ourselves cut off from people and from God

But even if we don't feel especially bad about what we've done, when we if we're sniping at people, they often withdraw from us

Life-giving, healthy relationships with other people, with substances or experiences and with God are all God's creation, God's idea, and God's property.

So when we engage in any activity that breaks or distorts those relationships, we are stepping out of the light and starting to entangle ourselves with darkness

And darkness always, always always wants to leave you and me isolated, cut off from the life-giving-relationship with God and with other people and with life-giving relationship to things that we were made for

For many of us, we'll come to our senses somewhere in these first couple of steps

we'll feel the pain or remorse and we'll off-ramp out of this vicious cycle, at least temporarily until the next time we make a bad decision

But if we're in a really bad head space or pattern, what this isolation does is feed us back into another round of

→ **Unhealthy Responses** another round of making bad decisions that complicate a hard situation and the vicious cycle continues

We don't all end up there all the time, but do you see how that pattern plays out in some instances in your life?

Paul and Silas, they're in a hard situation—beaten, imprisoned, in chains for doing something good

And in the darkest part of their forced shelter in place moment, their response to their stress is going to kick-start the virtuous cycle that God wants to invite you and I into

Here's how Paul and Silas the blank:

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

When I'm in a hard spot, most of my energy directed towards God is more about an airing of grievances rather than a singing of praises, but that's exactly what Paul and Silas do

They're not looking for someone to blame. They're not asking why bad things happen to good people.

What can we do while sheltered in place to be more resilient, more fruitful, to become the kinds of life-giving people that God designed us to be?

We can enter into the **Shelter-In-Place Virtuous** cycle, even while we all experience **S-I-P Stress**

The first step is to pick up right where Jaime left us last week

We can cultivate an **Extraordinary Vertically-Oriented Response**—instead of being focused on their circumstances, Paul and Silas are focused on God.

They're singing and praying and worshiping God nice and loudly at midnight in jail

Now it might not be so great for you to be walking around the house at midnight keeping everyone around you awake with your lovely singing voice!

That might be complicating a hard situation with a bad decision!

But this first virtuous cycle step in the midst of our shelter-in-place stressful situations is to see that there's more to life than just our shelter-in-place stressful circumstances: there is God.

There is a God who stands outside of quarantine, who is bigger than our season or situation who is worthy of worship and praise no matter what's going on in our lives

and when we participate in worship it gathers us up into a larger world, a larger reality than our current circumstances

We're gathered up into the chorus of angels and hundreds of millions who have gone before us who are with God now and worshiping before him always

Worship reminds us that there is a God who is bigger than those circumstances: this is hard, but is not forever.

This is hard, but it is not the most definitive thing happening in our lives.

God stands over this season and invites us into worship that we might relate rightly to the situation and the stressors and the people and the temptations that are a part of this season

What we're doing here, together, Sunday morning, as we gather to worship is attempting to put ourselves on the virtuous, life-giving cycle of organizing our hearts and lives and minds around the greatness of God in the midst of this shelter-in-place experience

Paul and Silas here in chains, in the dungeon, respond with prayer, praise, worship to the God who is Lord, even over their darkness, even over their dungeon.

And from there, the story takes a dramatic turn as we continue to read:

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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

Some time ago I was having a conversation with a guy who was really frustrated with the circumstances in his life and he felt like God wasn't doing His part to fix them

And he talked about how the Bible is full of stories of God moving in wonderful ways to fix circumstances, but he felt like his prayers hadn't been answered and God hadn't come through

Maybe you've had this experience before. I know I have. And I told him that part of why we have these stories in the Bible is that they're extraordinary

The reality is that not every story in biblical times or in our own lives today ends with circumstances being changed to our liking

But here's what IS true, and it's our next step in the Shelter-In-Place virtuous cycle: **in response** to shelter-in-place stress

we can demonstrate an extraordinarily vertically oriented response towards God and when we do that

→ **God moves us to freedom:** SOMETIMES God's freedom IS circumstantial— sometimes the chains DO come off, sometimes we lose one job and we get another, sometimes the family situation does get better and healthier or the problems get solved

But always, God's movement in our lives is a movement towards freedom—and that freedom is different from how our culture currently defines it

God's freedom is about freedom from our circumstances dictating to us who we're becoming and how we're living

God's freedom is about becoming the man or woman God intended us to be in the beginning

God's freedom is the freedom to be participating in God's kingdom coming, God's will being done on earth as it is heaven

God's freedom is freedom from slavery to sin and freedom to be whole and holy people

God's freedom is always about knowing that our deepest needs and longings for security, for identity, to have a sense of significance or worth and to live a life of meaning and purpose

All of that is provided for in him.

When we go looking for answers to security and identity and purpose in our circumstances we become a slave to our circumstances

and then when our circumstances come crashing down we go crashing down with them

But when we orient ourselves vertically in worship, the result is freedom because right worship always leads to freedom and the worship of anything else always leads us to slavery

In the midst of their shelter-in-place dark moment, Paul and Silas worship God. The result for them is freedom from their circumstances dictating who they're becoming

And in this case there's also freedom from their chains

Now what they do with this freedom is key to continuing the virtuous cycle

God moves wonderfully to set Paul and Silas free with a tremendous earthquake

The jailer sees this, prison doors are opened and he assumes prisoners have escaped And because his whole identity is wrapped up in being a good, dutiful jailer who doesn't let prisoners escape

AND because he knows that the Romans tend to severely punish jailers who don't do their job well he draws his sword to kill himself

But what do Paul and Silas do with their God-given freedom?

→ **Freedom For Extraordinary Serving:** the freedom that Paul and Silas have been given by God is not just for their own benefit but for the benefit of the people around them

The jailer is the one who is keeping them hostage and he's a nobody in the grand scheme of things—why should they care about him?

God has sprung them from jail and the most intuitively obvious thing for them to do is to get out of here and get on with their world-changing journey

But what do they do? They recognize that God has freed them in order for them to serve someone else

They submit their earthly freedom to the jailer who was holding them hostage

My friends, I don't know your situation and circumstances, but what I do know is that if you move in a Godward direction, you're going to experience some sort of God-given freedom

And in order to participate in the shelter-in-place virtuous cycle and in order to cultivate greater resilience and strength and fortitude as we run this race together

We have to learn to be good and faithful stewards of the freedom God has given to us

What if the way God thinks about freedom is like the parent who gives their 5-year old kid two ten dollar bills around Christmas time:

one of those \$10 bills is so that they'll spend it to give it to their brother or sister
and the other of those \$10 bills is so that they'll spend it on something to give to that same parent

God gives you and I two \$10 bills called freedom so that you might have something to give away: one is for the people around you who need you to attend to them, the other is so that you might have something to give to God

Because there are people all around us who are struggling under the weight of this shelter-in-place experience

You see them on your Facebook newsfeed, you know about them in your extended family, you're on a Zoom call with them in a meeting of some sort

And part of why God springs you and I from the jail of being hostage to our circumstances for meaning and purpose in life

is so that we might have the energy and bandwidth and margin to go and pursue and check-in and pray for and care for the people around us

Paul and Silas have an opportunity to escape. Instead, incredibly, they serve a man who was their captor who was so despondent due to his circumstances that he is ready to kill himself.

That's the counter-intuitive move in the virtuous cycle that keeps us in the flow of grace, and the results are extraordinary, let's finish reading this story:

29 The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."

32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. 33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. 34 The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

I recently had a conversation with a woman who was wrestling with a very important and difficult issue—on what basis or grounds can we possibly in the 21st century do evangelism?

Who are we to tell anyone else that they're misguided or wrong in their beliefs and they need to put their faith and trust in Jesus as the way to God

For many of us, this rubs against everything we've been taught as we're in this very diverse, pluralistic world that tells us that tolerance is the most important value

And I totally get that and especially if you're not a Jesus person, it's likely that you have very similar objections

But here's what I know: following Jesus has been the single best thing in my life.

Having God's grace and mercy and forgiveness and love at the center of my life has made me a better dad, husband, neighbor, and set me free from all kinds of things I would have fallen into otherwise

And because this has been the single greatest thing that ever happened to me, I'm so very glad someone told me about it

And someone had to tell them, and someone had to tell that person. And someone had to tell the person before that and someone had to tell the person before that

For 2,000 years, there has been a line of people who were bold enough and courageous enough sometimes giving up their very lives in order to tell people about the wonders of God's mercy and grace and power and love demonstrated through Jesus

to the point it got to all of us, 2,000 later and I'm so very grateful

And so in spite of all the messages to the contrary, I will take my place in the long line of people who have gone before me, and we as a church will stand in this generation's gap, and we will declare the good news

That God so loved the world, he sent his Son to deliver us from sin, to forgive us all our sins and reconcile us to God forever

Whoever believes in him, lives forever. Whoever does not remains separated from God.

Here in this story, Paul and Silas have responded to shelter-in-place stress with the extraordinary response of worship

God has moved, as he always does, to set them free

Paul and Silas receive that freedom and surrender it and to serve a man they have no earthly business serving

And what happens? **Others are caught up in the virtuous cycle**

The jailer and his whole family all come to believe, they're all baptized, they're all gathered up into the great work and great story of God's freedom

And the jailer who was once so despondent about his situation that was literally ready to kill himself is now filled with joy—him and his whole house!

He's now making that final step in the virtuous cycle: -> Him and his whole house are now caught up in the **Extraordinary Vertically Oriented Response**

The jailer is now free to experience joy because his circumstances no longer define him, he can worship, right along with Paul, no matter what

[switch to lower thirds] How do others get caught up in the virtuous cycle? in two ways:

1. **Extraordinary serving** as Paul and Silas live in ways that are counterintuitively wonderful and save this man's life
2. **Clear articulation of the gospel.** They don't just live it, they're able to explain it, put some words around it. Some of us just want to live a nice life and hope that's enough.

But words at some point are always necessary. They don't have to be fancy or complicated, it just needs to be clear and spoken in love: believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved

Saved from building your identity and purpose and meaning from circumstances. Saved for a radical freedom, given to us by God, so that we might have something to give away, back to God and to give to the people around us

Paul and Silas put words around that, the jailer's life is changed, his whole family is changed

And maybe, just maybe, Paul and Silas told the jailer and his family and they told someone who told someone who told someone who told someone who told someone
Until 2,000 years later here I am, telling you

Today's Take-W.I.T.H.

Invitation to participate in the **Shelter-In-Place Virtuous Cycle**—in the midst of SIP stress, which we're all going to feel

There's an invitation to cultivate an extraordinary vertically-oriented response

And as we do that, what we find is that God always ushers us into a Godward freedom, sometimes it's a wonderful gift of circumstances being changed for us

But always it's about the freedom God offers us to become the kind of people that we were intended to be in the very beginning

And in order to continue to participate in the virtuous cycle, there's a call to do with our freedom what Jesus did: to lay it down for the sake of serving others

God gives us freedom so that we might have something to give away—back to him and to the people around us

And when we do that, we're sometimes given opportunity to invite others into the virtuous cycle: don't duck

Find simple and clear and loving words to articulate the good news of a God who invites us out of our vicious cycles and into his virtuous cycle

And sometimes that results in a greater and growing cloud of witnesses who enter into the cycle from the top all over again

My friends, what if during your shelter-in-place experience, this was your map? What if this was the story you got to tell after this was all over?

What if this was the new habit of heart and mind and spirit that shaped you and the people around you?

That's the invitation this morning as we enter into communion...

Transition to communion

Worship

Take communion

DOXOLOGY (full screen words with Curtis and Maggie singing in the background)

Benediction (with offering nudge)