

Power.

It's a word that resonates with most of us. The idea of power can evoke different powerful emotions in us depending on how we're thinking at the time. If the power is out of our control, it can be fear that comes first. But if we're talking about power that is or could be ours...then the feelings change. If it could be ours but isn't yet, we want it. We want that power to be ours. And if it's power we have, the rush of confidence and security that come with it are something we crave. And I think if we're honest when we think about power, these are the first thoughts that spring to mind when we think about power.

But why do we want it to be ours? Why do we crave it so much? Why are our first thoughts that it can or even should be ours? Certainly our natural selfishness plays a factor. We just want stuff for ourselves. But goes even deeper than that. The idea of security plays a big role. We want to feel safe, secure. We want to not be afraid of things that could hurt us, and to do that we need to have more power than the things that could hurt us. We need to have that power over them. But it all boils down to that overriding factor of our sinful nature; that we want to be God. We want to be in charge of ourselves, we want to decide for ourselves and have the ability to do what we want when we want to. And to do that we need the power to.

And the kind of power that comes to mind when we think about the concept is usually the big, the flashy, the "powerful" shows of power. The things that can coerce others into doing what we want so we can have that self-determination we so crave. The things that can hurt, the things that can threaten. Even some of the stuff we fear when we think of "power". Natural disasters, weapons and the like. Or in our society sometimes simply money or authority over others. That, to us is power, real power.

But there's a problem with power the way we think of it. There's a problem with power the way we want it. See, it's that kind of ambition that got us in trouble in the first place. Because that power can't be ours. That kind of power and authority belongs to only one person; God himself. Any that we ever think we have only is "ours" in the sense that he lets us use it, he lets us have it. As with anything, whatever we have is only because he chose to give it to us and should he decide to take it back, to take it away from us, there is absolutely nothing we can do about it. We cannot have security in ourselves, we cannot be self-determining no matter how much "power" we have or collect because God will always be over us. No matter how much we have, he has the authority to change that in an instant, and nothing we do can change that.

And when you understand how the distribution of power truly works, that's when that other side of the "power" concept can settle in, the one of fear. Because when someone else has all the power and we have none of it, we understand just how completely helpless we are. And that's scary. To have your fate completely, and I mean completely, in someone else's hands? God may have all the power, and we may like power but we don't want him using that power on us. Because there's a pretty vocal part within us that knows how that would turn out if God were to use that power on us. The kind of power as we usually think about it is not something we want to see from God.

And if, like many of us, we have reached a point where we know why God won't use that kind of power on us and that we don't need to be afraid of it, there is still a temptation we have to watch out for, and that's wanting God to still use that kind of fierce power on others. We may be tempted to think that those out there who are such blatant unbelievers, who defiantly spit in God's face with their lives and actions everyday, we think that God should use some of that power on them, show them who he really is so that they take him seriously. But knowing what that would be like for you and knowing that God has chosen to show you love anyway instead means that we also wouldn't wish that on anyone. We don't want that terrifying power of God shown, not in any capacity.

And the difference between our thinking about power and God's thinking and God's use is highlighted very well in our account today from Acts 16: <read text: Acts 16:25-34>.

Our reading opens with an unmistakable display of the kind of power we think of when we hear "power". A violent earthquake shakes the very foundations of a prison that Paul and Silas were being held in. There can be no question that this earthquake was deliberately caused and orchestrated by God himself. The odds of a natural earthquake shaking a prison in such a way as to open all the doors and unlock all the chains but not actually just crumble the building or kill everyone inside would be staggering. It's just not possible unless God were involved.

And so here is our first example; God displays the kind of awesome power that we think of with power and sometimes (wrongly) look for him to carry out on others. And what is the result? Terror and despair. The jailer arrives to see the cage open and simply assumes everyone took the appropriate advantage of the situation and fled. As the

man responsible, his own life would be forfeit to his own masters. It would almost certainly be better to take his own life now than to endure whatever they would do to him.

This is not the only time in scripture that we see this. Again and again when the Lord Almighty displays his true power, human beings can only tremble before it. We think of the Israelites before Mount Sinai who pled with Moses that they not face God himself or they would die. Or of the many times angels appeared in the glory of the Lord and people trembled before them. When God displays his power in these great or terrible ways, there can be only despair.

The jailer despaired to the point of death because he thought his jail had been emptied. Imagine perhaps, how much more terror might have gripped him if he understood the God that sent this earthquake. You and I have the benefit of a better perspective. We have seen in scripture what our God is capable of and what our God demands to appease him. Our God, as we've said, has full authority and power over us. And his one demand is that we recognize his power and authority. That we love him above all things, that we put him at the forefront and as the priority in our lives.

But we have not. As we said at the beginning, rather than recognize the Lord as God, we have tried instead to make gods of ourselves. Rather than acknowledge the power and authority God has, we have sought to grab that power and authority for ourselves. And what little power God has granted us, we not only fail to recognize that we only have it because he gave it to us, we abuse that power for selfish means rather than use it to give him honor and show love to our neighbor.

When we stand before the absolute power of our God, there may initially be some small comfort in knowing that God will be fair to us in using that power. But that comfort crumbles when we realize that the fair outcome for us is punishment for our crimes. We know all too well that on our own we have every reason to feel terror in the face of God's power.

But despair is not what God wants for you or anyone else. That kind of "power" on display is not what he wants to show us. Sure, sometimes it's necessary to wake us up, to make us realize just how powerless we truly are on our own, to make us realize exactly how much we need him, but that's not how God wants to treat us. It's not the kind of power he wants to show us.

That is shown in the short conversation that follows. After stopping the jailer and assuring him that he was going to be okay, the prisoners had not fled, the jailer asks Paul and Silas that simple and profoundly important question. What must I do to be saved? Believe. And that was that. Trust in the Lord Jesus was all that was necessary to fix this catastrophe of a problem every human finds themselves in. Paul and Silas ministered to the jailer and his family, told them about Jesus, and they were all baptized.

And he and his family were saved. They were changed from a path that led from eternal death to a future of eternal life in heaven with their creator. They had earned and deserved death, but they would live because the eternal God died for them. And the value and benefit of that death, the eternal life they were gifted came to them not through brute force and terrible displays but through water and the word of God. So simple. So subtle. And so utterly powerful. This is real power. It's so basic and yet so breathtaking. The washing of rebirth that comes in baptism, where by water and the Spirit a heart is changed from one that hates God, to one that loves God and trusts in Jesus as Savior. It's a change that we are not capable of by ourselves and yet it's one that God does. And not through some impossible or rare means, but through two of the most common things on the planet; water and word.

The change is remarkable. Just look at our example in this reading of those who have undergone the change. Paul and Silas, chained in prison because they were trying to help the people of that city. Where the selfish old nature would become embittered and angry, these two were singing praises to God while chained to a wall. The trust in the power of their Lord was complete. They knew he had the power to rescue them from that situation, but even if God chose not to, it didn't matter, because he had already used his power to save them. And through the songs and praises they sang, the other prisoners were hearing and being exposed to that real power of God that saves and comforts instead of inspiring terror and despair.

It is in our old nature to crave "power" as the world thinks of it. But that power cannot help us, that power isn't even ours. Even craving God to use that power on others isn't helpful. Turn your eyes away from that hollow kind of power and look to the real power. The God who saves through the simple and the mundane. By word and water you have been made clean and rescued. By the power of God carried in these means, you will not die but live. Look to this real power of God for fulfillment and make that power your own to share with those who would otherwise despair. Amen.