

July 8, 2012 - No One Goes Unheard

I noticed with the warmer weather, after all the rain, everyone is out cutting their grass, I don't know if you noticed that. There was someone in our neighbourhood out cutting their grass far too early yesterday morning. I don't know if you've had that experience either. When I go out and cut my grass I like to be very particular about it and I like to get the nice straight even lines going across my grass. Unfortunately, when I cut my grass it looks more something like that, and probably not even that good cause those lines are wavy but parallel, mine are just kind of all over the place. I don't know if you've had trouble trying to cut straight lines in your grass but as I've done that I've wondered "if it's that hard for me to keep a straight line over the, however many, forty feet that my lawn is, I wonder how it would be to keep a straight line across a whole long field when you're a farmer when you're trying to plant your crop or whatever." I know that these days some of the farmers have GPS in their tractors now which keeps them on a straight line which seems to help. I am told that before the GPS came along there was another system that helped the farmer keep a straight line when they were sowing their field. The trick was that you pick some point on the far end of the field and you look directly at that point and just drive straight to that point. That's how you kept a straight line going through the field. Well, sometimes in life we kind of need that fixed point, we need something out ahead of us that we can keep our eyes on and keep our path straight as we try to navigate the day-to-day chaos of life. We're all looking for something we can know; something we can count on; something we can depend on when all else fails. Something we can trust in.

During this series of lessons, that's what we've been trying to do. We've been trying to find some things in scripture that says "No matter what else happens, this you can know for certain."

How many of you recognize the name Paul Marcelle? Does that help a little bit? (Picture), Probably not. How about if I show you a different picture of Paul Marvelle. Now how many of you recognize him? Paul Marcelle is the Verizon "can you hear me now" guy. He did this whole series of commercials where he would go to all different locations and talk on his cell phone and say "Can you hear me now? Good. Can you hear me now? Good." And I imagine that most of us who have cell phones have had that experience, where you've been on a phone and you've been talking to someone and then all of a sudden something happens and your reception starts to fade away and then after a few minutes you realize that you're talking but no one is on the other end. And you say "Can you hear me? Is there anyone there? Is there anyone listening?" Well, I had an experience similar to that just the other day. Yesterday Michelle was at the mall with the boys and she called me at home and said "We've just finished up here at the mall, we've had lunch, but I can bring you home something for lunch, if you like." And I said "Okay". And she replied with "Well, I don't know what, I'm here at the mall and it's loud and it's crazy and the boys are going all over the place and I haven't had a chance to think about it." And I stopped and I kind of got my edge in there and I said "I said Okay". And she said "Okay, I'll do that then." And sometimes

it's just hard to hear, it's hard to listen, it's hard to get our message across. We all want to be heard. Maybe you've had the experience of being in a restaurant and you're trying to get the waiter's attention because you're ready for your bill or you want a refill. The place is crazy and they're running around and you try and get their attention and you say "Excuse me, pardon me" but they just can't hear you because there is just so much going on in the restaurant. Perhaps you've sat in a business meeting and felt you have had some really good ideas to share, or something really valuable to contribute but for one reason or another, you are not given a chance to share your ideas. Or when you do share your ideas, people just kind of write them off and no one really listens to what you have to say. Or maybe you come from one of those families or you have a group of friends that kind of likes to all talk at the same time. Have you been in one of those scenarios? Where everyone likes to be talking all at the same time and so when you try and talk no one hears what you're saying because they are all talking at the same time, as well. In all of those situations we just kind of feel like sometimes, we would like someone to listen.

Now the problem comes when we start to assume that God listens the way we do. Because there is an error in that. I don't know if you've had the experience of talking to a child but, there are many lessons that can come out of talking to a child but this one, in particular, comes to mind. I often talk to my older son and we sit down and we have a heart-to-heart discussion about something and how this behaviour is inappropriate and how we should do this, instead of do this. We go through this long thing and I try to be very specific and detailed and clear in my communication with him and after we get through all of discussion, I say "Do you understand?" And he says "Yes" and I say "Okay, what did I say?" He gets this kind of blank look in his eyes and you can tell the wheels are turning and he's fishing for an answer and usually the first thing that comes up is "Be a good listener!" Lots of times that's the correct answer but you know he's just guessing. My younger son is a totally different issue. Whenever we have one of those discussions with our three year old, we go through and try and explain it on his terms and his level and everything. You get through the whole thing and you say "Okay?" And he says "Okay". And you say "Okay, what did I say?" "I want pizza". It reminds me of the dog, his name is Doug, out of the movie "Up" and his master has fitted him with this collar that turns his barking into English words so that people can understand him. It's really cute except that almost every conversation with Doug goes something like this "Well that's a big problem you've got, maybe you should" "Squirrel". "Well we could go this way or maybe we could" "Squirrel". Every conversation with Doug kind of goes along that same thing. Maybe you've talked to people who kind of listen that same way. I know I have on occasion had those conversations. But God is not like us. God does not listen like us. Listen to how the Psalmist describes the way God listens: Psalm 55:17:

"Morning noon and night I cry out in my distress and the Lord hears my voice."

Psalm 116:1-2: "I love the Lord because He hears my voice and my prayers for mercy, because He bends down to listen. I will pray as long as I have breath."

God is a much, much better listener than we are. Morning noon and night He listens. He bends down low. He leans in close and listens. And it radically changes our picture when we stop basing God's ability in listening to us on our own sporadic ability to listen to others.

Which brings us to our first story for this morning. It comes out of Acts, Chapter 12:9-16 Peter has been thrown into prison and here's what happens next:

"Peter left the cell following the angel and all the time he thought it was a vision. He didn't realize that it was actually happening. They passed the first and the second guard post and came to an iron gate leading to the City. This opened for them, all by itself. They passed through and started walking down the street and the angel suddenly left him. Peter finally came to his senses. "It's really true" he said. "The Lord has sent an angel and sent me from what Herod and the Jewish leaders planned to do to me." When he realized this he went back to the home of Mary the mother of John Mark where many were gathered for prayer. He knocked on the door in the gate and a servant girl, named Rhoda, came and opened it. She recognized Peter's voice and was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the door, she ran back inside and told everyone "Peter is standing at the door!" "You're out of your mind" they said. When she insisted, they decided it must be his angel and meanwhile, Peter continued knocking outside. When they finally opened the door and saw him, they were amazed."

It's an incredible story. It's an incredible answer to prayer but did you notice the people's response. Peter is rescued by the angel and it says "When he came to his senses he said 'Is it really true?' The church is meeting, praying for Peter's release, and when he comes, Rhoda comes out and says "Our prayers have been answered". They say "You're out of your mind!" And even when they see Peter for themselves, they were amazed. These were people who had seen God work before, sometimes in miraculous ways, and yet, they seem surprised that God actually answered their prayers this time. I'm afraid we're not much different than that. How often do we pray, how often do I pray, not really expecting much to come of it. You see, we are in large extent, most of us slaves to things like logic and reason and science and the things we can explain. Those aren't bad things but sometimes they're like driving through a tunnel while talking on your cell phone when it comes to our communication with God. Prayer often becomes the option we turn to when all else fails. When we run out of answers, then we go and ask God.

Consider some of the prayers that we often pray. When someone is sick and we want to pray for that person, sometimes we don't actually pray for God to heal them as much as we pray for the doctors who are ministering to them. God please guide the doctors' hands and help them to function at the top level of their skill and to give their full attention to the symptoms of this person. Now don't get me wrong. When I am on the operating table I want the surgeon to bring his "A" game. If I have a choice, I will take the most special, specialist, that there is. But maybe, I need to spend more time praying that God's hands will be

working more than I am praying that the doctor will have a good education to treat me.

Or maybe a little more close to home for me. Often we pray for our speakers before they get up and share God's word for us. But less often do we say "God please give the speaker Your words to speak." More often we'll say something like this: "Lord please give him a ready recollection of the thoughts he has prepared." Now again, don't get me wrong, things go a lot smoother up here when I sort of remember the things I've been studying all week. But, maybe we should pray a little bit more, for God's words and a little bit less for the speakers' memories.

How often are we like Peter and the church in Acts 12, we pray not really expecting a whole lot to come out of it. How often are we more amazed when our prayers DO get answered, than when they don't. By doing so I think we rob God of an opportunity to affirm our faith in Him.

Even when we do pray and pray in faith, sometimes our prayers aren't answered in the way we like or aren't answered in the time table we'd like. Case in point is our second story which also comes out of Acts. Flip over a few pages to Acts, Chapter 16: 11-15 for our second story this morning:

"From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city in the district of Macedonia. We stayed there several days. On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us."

Paul and Silas and Luke gather at a river outside the city of Philippi. Now this is the river, the traditional spot where people say it actually happened. It's outside the city, which makes us think that there probably was no Synagogue inside the city of Philippi, that's why Paul and his friends went outside the city to find Jewish worshippers. When they get there they meet a woman named Lydia. It's kind of funny because this spot, there's now a little town there. The town is called Lydia and the grocery store is called Lydia Grocery Store and the post office is Lydia Post Office and there's the Lydia café. Everything in the town is called Lydia. Just outside the little town there's this area on the river, they've build kind of a little place you can worship they've actually built a little baptistery into the river there, you can see kind of that Cross shape. Now the people Paul and Silas who met there, they were likely Jews, and the woman, her name was Lydia she was from Thyatira which is actually over in what we would call Turkey. She sold purple cloth. Purple cloth was expensive because of the dye it had in it. Purple dye was expensive because it was hard to make. In Thyatira they made

purple dye by crushing snails. Now this is an actual Thyatiran purple snail, sitting on a little piece of marble we found in the ruins there. So they would crush these snails and make the purple dye and that's what made these clothes so expensive, that Lydia would sell.

And so Paul and Silas and Luke stay in Philippi for awhile and that's when things start to get interesting. Let's continue to read, Acts 16: 11-15:

“One day as they were going down to the place of prayer, they met a demon-possessed, slave girl. She was a fortune teller who earned a lot of money for her masters. She followed Paul and the rest of us shouting ‘These men are servants of the most high God. They have come to tell you how to be saved.’ This went on day, after day, until Paul got so exasperated that he turned and said to the demon within her ‘I command you, in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her’ and instantly it left her.”

Now, to understand a little bit about the situation going on there, I will give you just a brief history of what's going on in that context. There was a Greek god whose name was Python. Obviously, as you might guess, it was often depicted as a serpent. At one point in Greek mythology, Python is defeated by Apollo and Apollo takes over basically all of Python's worshippers and his temples and his oracles. The most famous oracle being the oracle at Delphi, which some of you might have heard of. Now, what these oracles did, they would go into a cave or some other place and they would breathe in significant amounts of ethylene, methane or carbon dioxide, and then they would come out and prophesy. Now, in Philippi, in the market place, there is a stone which actually refers to the oracle Pythia. So it's assumed that there was a temple or maybe even an oracle in Philippi that came from this kind of cult and this background. Now, what's interesting to note that in your Bible when they talk about this slave girl they will say that she was a fortune teller, or maybe that she had the spirit of divination, depending on what your translation is. In the original Greek it uses two words, *pnuma pathona*. Now, translated literally, those two words mean ‘spirit of the serpent’. So you can tell from that context, that this girl would have been perceived to be from that kind of background, that kind of lineage, so that is why she was so valuable to her masters. Because, if this was, in their opinion, a legitimate oracle, she would have been very, very valuable. She would not only have been a great source of revenue for her masters but she would have been of great personal value too. Can you imagine having a legitimate oracle for your personal slave? Imagine what that would mean for your personal life. Imagine what that would mean for your business career. Imagine what that would mean for your political aspirations if you had this person. In fact, the text tells us that she had more than one master which kind of indicates that she was so valuable that a couple guys had to go in together to put up the purchase price to get this lady. So, now you know why what comes next is so dramatic and the response is so overwhelming. It says, continuing in Verse 19:

“Her masters hopes of wealth are now shattered so they grab Paul and Silas and drag them before the authorities at the market place. ‘The whole city is in an uproar because of these Jews’ they shouted to the city officials. ‘They are teaching customs that are illegal for us

Romans to practice' and a mob quickly formed against Paul and Silas. The city officials ordered them stripped and beaten with wooden rods and they were severely beaten, then they were thrown into prison. The jailor was ordered to make sure that they didn't escape so the jailor put them in the inner dungeon, clamped their feet in stocks. Around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the other prisoners were listening."

So the owners of the slave girl take Paul and Silas and drag them into the market place at Philippi. You see, when the girl loses her fortune telling ability, the owners lose their income. So they stir up the crowd and convince the city officials that Paul and Silas should be thrown into jail. Now the previous year the Emperor, Claudius had expelled all of the Jews from Rome because he believed that they were trouble makers. So these guys play on that and they say to the city officials 'the whole city is in an uproar because of the Jews.' So the city officials kind of have shades of what happened in Rome under Claudius so they decide something must be done. So they take Paul and Silas and throw them in jail. Now, after being falsely accused and shamefully stripped, severely beaten and unjustly thrown into prison, Paul and Silas sat there at midnight worshipping and praying. Now, just pause for a minute and think. If that had been you, what would you be praying for at that moment. Perhaps rescue. Perhaps revenge. Let's see what happens with Paul and Silas next. Acts 16: 25-34:

"Around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the other prisoners were listening. Suddenly there was a massive earthquake and the prison was shaken to it's foundation. All the doors immediately flew open and the chains of every prisoner fell off. The jailor woke up to see the doors wide open and he assumed the prisoners had escaped so he drew his sword to kill himself but Paul shouted to him "Stop! Don't kill yourself. We are all here.' The jailor called for the lights fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and asked 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied 'Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved along with everyone in your household.' And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived at his household. Even at that hour of the night the jailor cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. He brought them into his house and set up a meal before them. His entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God."

At another location in the ruins at Philippi, that's our guide there. When we came to this spot he pointed to this area and said "This is traditionally believed to be the jail cell where Paul and Silas were held and then the earthquake, etc. etc...." And so everyone in the group rushed forward and started snapping photos and trying to look inside. We wanted to get as much of this piece of history as we could, and after everyone had kind of completed that big rush, he said "But it's not." He said "it's a water cistern, it's nothing special." The jail probably would have been somewhere out of town, not downtown where this is. Anyways, they were in jail, whatever that jail looked like and they were there and a giant earthquake came along and it shook open all of the doors and all of the chains were loose. The jailer

realizes this and he's about to fall on his own sword because according to Roman law, if the prisoners had escaped, the jailer would have been responsible and would assume both their shame and their sentences for their crimes. Paul yells out 'Don't, we're all still here.' At this point the jailer says 'What must I do to be saved' and he takes Paul and Silas to his house and he gives them food and it amazes me, that it is at this point, that their wounds get washed. It amazes me that from earlier on in the day when they had actually been beaten and then thrown into jail and they're sitting down in the dungeon that it's not until the middle of the night that someone actually stops to wash their wounds. But he cares for them and he washes their wounds and he gives them a big meal and they share with their household. Paul and Silas tell them the 'good news' and everyone in the household is saved.

But, if Paul and Silas' prayer had been for rescue, or for revenge, they had gotten neither at this point because you see, the next morning they were still in prison. So were all the other prisoners who didn't make a break for it when they could have the night before. Let's read the rest of the story. Acts 16:34-40:

"The next morning the city officials sent the police to tell the jailer. 'Let those men go.' So the jailer told Paul 'The officials have said you and Silas are free to leave. Go in peace.' But Paul replied 'they have publicly beaten us without a trial and put us in prison. We are Roman citizens, so now they want us to leave secretly? Certainly not. Let them come themselves to release us.' When the police reported this the city officials were alarmed to find that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, so they came to the jail and they apologized to them. They brought them out of the jail and begged them to leave the city. When Paul and Silas left the prison they returned to the home of Lydia. They met there the believers and encouraged them once more, and then they left town."

Overnight the officials have a change of heart. They sent word and asked Paul and Silas to sneak out of town quietly but that's when Paul spills the beans that actually they were both Roman citizens. Now, the city officials could get into some serious trouble for beating and imprisoning a Roman citizen without a proper trial. So the city officials are rather distressed about all this, so they come to the jail and they apologize for all that has happened, they bring Paul and Silas out of the jail for everyone to see, and they beg Paul and Silas to leave town before anyone else finds out what they have done. Now, Paul and Silas do eventually get their freedom and the Christians in Philippi get some credibility from the event and as you can tell from the way it is written, Luke actually stays in Philippi to help the brand new church establish itself.

Now, if their prayer was to get out of jail. It was answered eventually but not necessarily in the way they might have expected or on their own time line. I think Paul understood that that's often the way God works. Listen to what he writes in 2Cor. 12:7-9: He says:

"I've been given this thorn in my flesh" and in verse 8, "three different times I've begged the Lord to take it away. Each time He said 'My grace is all you need. My power works best in

weakness' so I'm now glad to boast about my weakness so that the power of Christ can work through me."

Paul says, three times I've begged for God to get rid of it and God answered but not in the way I had hoped. Instead of saying 'I will take it away', God said 'I will help you get through it.' Paul actually ended up in several other prisons in several other places and often it was for a much longer time not just for one night like it was in Philippi. But even during those long imprisonments Paul was somehow, still able to see God working. During one such imprisonment, Paul wrote back to the Church in Philippi and said this: Phil. 1:12-14:

"I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped spread the 'Good news' for everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ. And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers have gained confidence to speak boldly God's message, without fear."

You see, Paul understood that God's answers don't always come in the form we want or on the time table we want but Paul never doubted that God heard every prayer he offered.

Now, you may be saying 'That's great for a guy like Paul, but what about me?' Well just go back with me for a moment and consider who was in this story in Acts, Chapter 16. We have Lydia, who was a wealthy merchant. We have the fortune teller who was a slave. We have a jailer, who was a civil servant, so somewhere between the two of them. We have the prisoners who were in jail with Paul and Silas, who were criminals. We have Paul and Silas, who were apostles, who were church leaders, who were missionaries and God was listening to the hearts of all sorts of people throughout this story. Some of whom may not have even known that He was the One they needed to talk to. You see, God listens to us even when we don't know what to say. Paul writes in Romans 8:26 that:

"When we don't have the words to pray, the Spirit prays for us when words just won't do."

It seems like to Paul and the early Christians, there was no one who was unable to talk to God. There was no bad time to talk to God. There was no topic not worth talking to God about. Listen to his instructions to some of the First Century Churches:

To the Church in Philippi, he says 'Don't worry about anything, instead pray about everything.' Tell God what you need and thank Him for all He's done, then you will experience God's peace which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and your minds as you live in Christ Jesus. Phil. 1:12-14

To the Church in Thessalonica He says: "Be joyful always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." 1Thess. 5:16-18

To the Church in Ephesus He says: "Pray in the spirit at all times and on every occasion.

Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all the believers everywhere.” Eph. 6:18

Now, Paul seems to be instructing the Christians to talk to God all the time, about pretty much everything. I will be honest with you. I have been a little cynical in the past, about things like praying for God to find you a parking spot. Or praying for God to help you decide what to make for supper. But I am starting to realize that at least in part, that cynicism is based a lot more on the way that I listen to people, rather than the way God does. Based on the way I listen I think “God’s got a lot better things to do than hear how annoyed I am about finding a place to park.” Based on the way I listen, I think “Things like famine and war, and poverty and sin, these are things worth taking up God’s time for, but not this petty day-to-day life stuff. But the truth is, God literally has all the time in the World. The truth is there is nothing more pressing on God’s calendar than listening to you. The truth is, there is nothing too small, or too mundane, for you to talk it over with God. That is an awe inspiring thought when you consider we’re talking about God Almighty, the Creator of the Heaven’s and Earth, and He is bending down low, listening to me. Morning, noon and night, listening to me. Not because I’m so incredibly awesome, but because He is. Now, that doesn’t necessarily mean that he will make a car evaporate from the stall in front of you so you have a place to park, but He is still eager to listen to you tell Him how frustrated you are about finding a place to park. It may not mean that a million dollar check will show up in your mailbox the next day, if you pray about it but, God is listening when you tell Him about how stressed you are about your current financial situation. I’m pretty sure God couldn’t care less about which team wins a sporting event, but He loves to listen to you share your passion for that particular game.

Now, just imagine for a moment, how things might change if that running monologue I have going on in my head suddenly became a dialogue between me and God. Wouldn’t it make me more aware of God on a minute-by-minute basis? Wouldn’t it be a constant reminder that God is always with me? Wouldn’t it give me some extra strength in my moments of weakness. Wouldn’t it make it more difficult to ignore the suffering I see around me? Wouldn’t it be easier to see things from someone else’s point of view? Wouldn’t it be harder to hold on to that grudge? Wouldn’t it be easier to be more kind and forgiving? Wouldn’t it make sin just a little less inviting to me? Wouldn’t it make my heart just a little bit more thankful?

So, that is our challenge this week. Talk to God. Talk about the big things. Talk about the little things. Talk in the busy moments of the day. Talk in the quiet moments of the evening. Talk at Church and at home and at work and at play. Talk while shopping and cleaning and relaxing and cooking or driving. Talk to God all the time, about everything. Because this I KNOW....He is listening.