

God's Power at Work

Isaiah 37:3-12; Ephesians 3:11-21



God is at work. We make that claim as a statement of faith, for it is easier to recognize the presence and action of God in our past than in our present and future. We lay claim to the stories of faith—those stories of God's faithfulness toward those called Servants of the Most High. We claim their stories for the hope they instill that God is still present and working in our own lives as well.

In the days of Isaiah, there were many questions about the dealings of *Yahweh* with the people. There were many who believed they had been abandoned by God, while in reality the people had been in rebellion against service to the One they called God. They did not look to *Yahweh* for deliverance, but looked around with eyes attuned to the difficulties and physical means to overcome the enemies arrayed against them. It was Isaiah's task to remind the people to trust that God was still at work and would come to their aid. They needed simply to trust and surrender to God's will.

It was easier to fear the Assyrian army than to trust *Yahweh*. It was more tempting to trust in the horses and chariots of Egypt than to hope in God for deliverance. They could not see God at work. There did not appear to be evidence of God's presence, action, or desire to intervene. Isaiah called the people to confidence in God. God was faithful. God was at work. God would deliver without Egypt's help. God was already at work—they just did not see it.

Such was the case in Paul's day as well. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, God was at work within Paul and in the lives of the Ephesian believers. God's action was not limited to what they might see and measure according to the means of their world and society. God was in no way limited by the imagination of frail humanity, cowering in fear of death, destruction, and domination by force. Paul accords that God was at work by the power of Christ's love that is able to accomplish far more than we can even imagine.

Paul wrote while in chains. He did not write from some privileged position of wealth, comfort, and social standing as this world understands it. He did not offer the hope of one with no experience of suffering, pain, or persecution. Rather it was from a standpoint of what we consider affliction and distress that Paul writes of the hope of God's deliverance, the joy of God's presence, and the comfort of resting in God's loving grace.

This is not the gospel as we know it in this land of wealth, power, privilege and freedom. This is not the gospel of comfortable middle class American Christianity. This is rather the gospel of One who died in order to grant hope and life to those already dead. It is a gospel of comfort not from those who have faced the storms of oppression, persecution, hunger, and pain. These are words of comfort and hope arising from within the confines of prison walls. It is there that hope and faith are born, nurtured, given wings. It is in adversity that we turn to God and learn to trust.

You sent me down to the storm-ravaged area of Slidell, Louisiana to offer hope, grace, hot meals, and a tangible expression of God's love and care. The purpose of that trip was to grant relief from the physical and emotional distress occasioned by damage from the storm we call Katrina. I went with others to share words of comfort, faith, encouragement, and confidence in God's provision. What I

found was a people who were much more aware of God's presence and intervention that I would have imagined. Expecting to hear words of despair, I heard words of hope and confidence—faith renewed by the winds of a storm.

I expected to hear the stories of destructive winds. I expected to hear of houses wiped off their concrete slab foundations. I expected to hear of loss, toil, despair, anger, and frustration. I was not impressed so much with the accounts of pain, abuse, distress, hunger, and fatigue. Though not cherished, these were expected. I was surprised by the number of accounts of God's provision and intervention. Amid the overwhelming sense of destruction and loss were repeated affirmations that the stuff destroyed is just not that important.

I did not take the gospel to Slidell. It was already there. Christ did not send me to perform tasks and duties God required. I was there to join and rejoice in what God was already accomplishing above and beyond the efforts of the Red Cross and Virginia Baptists. God was reaching out with grace through means beyond the scope of my imagination. John and his wife were unscathed when a tree fell on the bed between them. Another man watched the wind shoot 2x12's from his utility shed over a fence 100 yards away, harming no one. Life is still difficult for the family of five returning to the empty shell of their house in Slidell. By grace, however, God is at work in their lives, accomplishing what we might scarcely conceive.

I saw a church building being used as a center of refuge, relief, and the response of God's grace amid tragedy. Educational space was taken over as living quarters for volunteers serving meals and clearing trees off of houses. The fellowship hall was transformed into "Grace-Mart," where volunteers would package toiletries, cleaning supplies, canned goods, diapers, and bedding for families in need. The parking lot was taken over by a feeding unit, trailers of canned and frozen goods, and a 6000 square foot tent—"Grace-Mart 2," a shelter for clothing and shoes being sorted for distribution for all who might need them.

I saw a steeple hanging from the roof and pointing toward the ground. God is not far off away in the clouds. God is here in our midst. God is present in our struggles, disasters, and pressing issues of pain, hunger, and want. God's power and grace and presence is at work flowing through our lives to accomplish what we might never dream or imagine. This is no gospel of health, wealth, and prosperity. The gospel of Jesus Christ is no stranger to suffering, distress, loss, oppression, persecution, and discomfort. Rather, this is its more natural setting—this is where faith lives and thrives. This is where we must cast our all into the hands of God, learning to trust Him to be sufficient. It is by the power of Christ already at work within us that grace can flow to meet not only our own needs, but the needs of a world in despair.

Jesus was no stranger to suffering, pain, and persecution. Paul was unafraid of confronting the tempests of life with its prisons, beatings, and pain. He knew that God was at work in the unexpected places. He knew that wherever he might go, God was already there. He was learning to understand the fullness of God's love and grace—a grace and love present amid the storms and trials of life as much or more than within the shelter of comfort. He recognized the hand of God at work in unimagined places and means. Will those around us recognize that God is at work in our lives? God is present. Will we allow Christ to be visible through our actions?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*