This week I had the privilege to be able to attend the North American Christian Convention. Several thousand Christian men and women of all ages gathered together for three days. The speakers challenged us to stay the course and continue to take the Gospel of Jesus to the world, and the workshops helped people learn how to do ministry more effectively.

Those things were fantastic, but one of the neatest parts of the whole conference was being in one room together with thousands of other Christians all worshiping together. There is something powerful about being in a room that shakes not with the music playing from the speakers, but with thousands of voices all being lifted up to God at the same time.

You know what I realized right in the middle of worship the very first night? Worship in that setting was easy. It was easy to worship when everyone else around us was doing it too. It was easy to worship when I could hardly hear the sound of my own voice as it mixed in with the voices around me. It was easy to worship when that’s what we were expected to do.

But worship isn’t always easy. It’s not always the thing that everyone else is doing. In fact, often times, worshiping might make you the odd one out. Playing Christian music at your desk at work might make you the butt of jokes around the office. Praying before your meals might make people not want to eat with you. Talking about the Gospel might make people avoid you.

So what do we do when things are hard? What do we do when worship isn’t easy, or even when we don’t feel like worshiping? How do we continue doing what God has called us to do when it becomes difficult?

When things become difficult and you don’t feel like worshiping God, I want you to remember what Paul and Silas went through in Acts 16. Rod taught last week about how Paul and Silas ended up in Philippi by following the leading of the Holy Spirit. While they were there, they got themselves into a bit of trouble. But through that experience, Paul and Silas show us just how important it is to put the worship of God above our circumstances.

**Acts 16:16–18 ESV — 16** As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. **17** She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” **18** And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

This young slave girl was just a tool for her owners to use to make money. They were taking advantage of her spiritual affliction to make a profit. This wasn’t just a trick that this girl was playing on people, she wasn’t an actress. She was possessed by a demon who gave her the ability to tell people’s fortunes.

Hollywood treats things like demon possession as a common plotline, something that makes its way into movies and TV shows on a regular basis until for many people it’s just another night of watching TV. Fortune telling is even more accepted by our culture, treated as a joke and a fun time instead of what it really is.

One of the mission trips that I went on in college was to New Orleans to help build Habitat for Humanity houses for people who had lost their homes in Katrina. We took an afternoon off and walked around New Orleans for a while, which was fun until we came to Bourbon Street. Bourbon Street is known for being a wild place during Mardi Gras and things like that, but there is something darker there.

There are voodoo shops and occult shops that market their goods to all the people who pass by on the street and make them seem innocent and fun. But we had a student on our trip that had been a practicing Wiccan before he came to Christ and got out of that life. He stopped at the entrance of Bourbon Street and wouldn’t go any further. He said the evil of what was in those shops was too oppressive for him to even walk past it on the street.

Things that our culture has passed off as innocent and fun to many people like fortune telling, tarot cards, and Ouija boards are actually what Satan uses to ensnare many people in a lifestyle that is full of evil, with real, evil spiritual power behind it.

These men who owned this young girl were using something dark and evil, something that had taken over the life of this young girl to make a quick buck. They were messing with a spiritual power that they probably didn’t understand, and certainly couldn’t control.

But just as the demons that encountered Jesus knew who he was, the spirit in this girl recognized Paul and Silas for who they were and the message they brought. Whether it was the spirit inside her, or the girl herself rebelling against the evil that possessed her, she followed them around proclaiming that they were the servants of God who could tell people the way to salvation.

The ESV says here that Paul became greatly annoyed, but I think that’s a misleading translation. That makes it seem like Paul got ticked off at her, but that’s not the idea here. The word Luke uses here is διαπονέομαι (dia-po-nay-o-mai) and it means to feel a burden as a result of someone’s proactive activity.

I don’t think Paul was annoyed at this girl at all. I think he felt a burden for her, placed on his heart by the Holy Spirit. This girl was being used purely as a source of profit, and she was held captive by a dark spiritual force to do so. Seeing this girl again and again as she followed them around and hearing what she was saying, Paul knew what she was dealing with, and he felt a burden to set her free, so he did.

The little girl was free of her spiritual oppression. She was also free of her ability to tell fortunes, which meant that her owners now had no use for her. They immediately saw that they would start losing money now that she couldn’t tell fortunes, and the stirred up the crowds against Paul and Silas. They couldn’t care less what they were preaching until it messed with their bottom line, and then they stood up and took notice.

They riled up the crowds, tore off their clothing, and beat them with rods. Verse 23 tells us they were severely beaten, and then these two men, severely beaten, were put into the inner prison and their feet were fastened into stocks.

Maybe word had spread of the miraculous escape of these pesky Christians before, we don’t really know. What we do know is that these men wanted to be sure that their prisoners would not escape. The jailer was told to keep them safely. That’s a word that meant it was his responsibility to see to it that these prisoners remained prisoners. If a jailer failed at that mission, he would be executed immediately. Since this was literally the jailer’s head on the line here, he took his job seriously.

Bruised, bloodied, swollen, in constant pain, and with no mention of any kind of medical care, Paul and Silas were locked in the inner prison with no chance of escape. Suffice it to say, they were having a rough night. Then we read the very next verse:

**Acts 16:25 ESV — 25** About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them,

Take a moment and think about how you would feel if you had just been through what Paul and Silas had been through. You can ask my wife, I’m not a very chipper person before I’ve had my coffee in the morning, much less after something like this. How in the world could these two guys be in the mood to sing songs when they had just been through all that?

This was not a joke for Paul and Silas. They had some serious injuries going on that hadn’t been treated at all. Instead of griping, complaining, or feeling sorry for themselves, Paul and Silas began to worship, and they kept going all through the night. The other prisoners were listening to them worship, and probably more than a few of them thought Paul and Silas had lost their minds.

What they were doing wasn’t crazy, it was true worship. Paul and Silas made the choice to worship God even when they certainly didn’t feel like it.

There’s more to this story. While Paul and Silas were worshiping, God did another miracle. The prison gates and all the shackles and stocks came loose, and all the prisoners were free to get up and leave. The jailer, knowing his life was on the line, was about to end his life himself, when Paul and Silas reassured him that the prisoners were still there. That jailer put his faith in Jesus, and he and his entire household were saved.

It’s an incredible end to the story, but every time I read it, I keep coming back to this extraordinary response that Paul and Silas had, worshiping in the midst of their imprisonment, beaten, bloody, and bruised. Even though their circumstances were horrible, they continued to worship God.

So, my question for you today is do you worship when it’s hard? Do we allow our circumstances to come between us and God? Do we allow the way that we feel to interrupt our worship of him? Do we let the other things in our lives come before our worship of God?

I think all of us at some point allow the circumstances of our lives to interfere with our worship of God. So, what are the things that keep us from worshiping? Do we worship when we find ourselves hurting, when we feel like we have been beaten down, when we feel like there is no escape from the pain we find ourselves in? Is it pain or heartache that makes you feel like you can’t worship, or just makes you feel like you don’t want to?

For some it might be work. To provide for your family, you have to work on a Sunday at times. Do you let that stop you from worshiping just because you can’t be here, or do you worship anyway?

For some it might be other commitments, other activities that conflict with weekly worship on a Sunday morning. I knew plenty of families who allowed their kids’ sports to decide how a Sunday morning would be spent, and very few of those kids grew up with a solid relationship with Christ. Do you let the other things in your life draw you away from worshiping God?

Maybe the problem is that you find yourself in a kind of prison, just like Paul and Silas. You find yourself trapped, and you don’t know how to worship in the midst of it.

Maybe your prison is debt, and there’s this constant weight over your head.

Maybe your prison is a sin that you can’t seem to conquer. You keep trying to fight it, you keep trying to avoid it, but you just can’t seem to get yourself under control.

Maybe your prison is an addiction that has begun to take over your life.

Maybe your prison is depression. Did you know that 6.9% of the US population will struggle with depression? 350 million people have depression worldwide, and 75% of those people are never treated. And here’s the kicker, depression is a mental illness that affects Christians just as much as it affects unbelievers. Maybe you live in that prison day in and day out, and no one else knows.

Maybe your prison is a disease of some kind. Maybe it’s cancer. Maybe it’s the beginnings of a long term illness that will affect the rest of your life. Maybe it’s something that affects the way you live every day, something that limits what you can do, and you feel trapped.

Those prisons that we find ourselves in, they are real. They are oppressive. They make us feel every bit as trapped as if we were locked behind metal bars. If you have ever experienced that, you know that one of the last things you feel like doing when you feel trapped like that is worship. So, what do we do?

I’d like to share with you three things that we can do to continue to worship when we don’t feel like it, when we feel like we’re in a kind of prison ourselves.

1. Get the right perspective on worship

Rick Warren’s book *The Purpose Driven Life* starts off with the words “It’s not about you”. One of the first things that we need to recognize when we talk about worship is that it’s not about us. It’s not about our preferences, it’s not about our favorite songs, it’s not about how we feel. Worship is meant for one thing: to glorify and honor God. Period, end of story. It’s great when we enjoy worship, but that’s not why we do it. We do it all for him.

Part of getting the right perspective is recognizing who God is, and who we are before God. When John saw a vision of God’s throne room in Revelation he tells us that he fell at his feet as though dead. When Isaiah had a similar vision, he knew immediately how unworthy he was before God, and he assumed that he was done for, because he was a sinful man in the presence of a Holy God.

That is the same God we come before every time we worship. Do we tremble in awe of the majesty of God when we come to worship, or do we yawn, and check our phones, and have conversations with other people in the middle of our worship of God? When we recognize who we are before God, our whole idea of worship will change.

There are Christians all around the world who go to extremes to worship together whenever they can. We had a missionary who came to a church camp once that told of his experience going to Africa for the first time. He had gotten a degree from a Bible college, learned to preach the way we preach here, for 30-40 minutes tops, and then he went off to Africa.

When he got there, they were excited to hear him speak, and when his sermon was over 30 minutes later, everyone just stared at him. He found out that people had walked from all over the countryside, in some cases from a village 8 hours away to worship together and hear him speak, so they expected more than 30 minutes of preaching. He was told if he couldn’t preach at least 4 hours, he should go back and learn more of the Bible at Bible college.

There are places around our world today where people might get arrested if they gather for worship. There are people being killed all across our world for gathering to worship. Yet they make it a priority because it is that important. Let me ask you a serious question. How many of you would not have showed up today if you knew the air conditioner wasn’t working in the church today?

There is an urgency, a seriousness to worshiping with other believers that Christians around the world and Christians throughout the centuries have had. I’m afraid that we’ve lost much of that urgency, that need to worship God in our Western cultures today.

We worship God because of who he is. He deserves all of our worship because he is God. Who God is never changes, so there is no reason for how we feel to keep us from worshiping. God is always God, and is always deserves our worship, no matter how we might feel at a given moment.

1. Worship changes us

When we worship God, when we participate in any of the spiritual disciplines, we bring ourselves into communion, into contact with God. When we worship, we open our hearts to a God who wants to work in our lives, and who wants to break down all the barriers that keep us from coming to him.

If you don’t feel like worshiping God, one of the best ways to overcome that is to worship. In worshiping, you open yourself up to the work of the Holy Spirit in your life, and he can change your heart.

1. Sometimes we have to do it anyway

Growing up, I sometimes heard the phrase ‘Fake it ‘till you make it’. That’s not what this is about. That sets us up to become fake people who aren’t serious about what we’re doing, and who aren’t genuine in our worship of God.

When we don’t feel like worshiping God, but we do it anyway, we are not faking it, we are making a choice. We are making a choice to give God glory. We are making a choice to proclaim the majesty of God. We are making the choice to give God the honor only he deserves. We are making the choice to love God.

No matter what the culture around us tries to tell us about love, no matter how many movies we watch about people falling in love, and falling out of love, real love is not a feeling, it is a choice. We make the decision to love other people, and we make the decision to love God. When people vow that they will love one another for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, ‘till death do us part, they are vowing to make the choice daily to love the other person.

When a person fails to do that, it’s not that they have fallen out of love and it’s totally out of their control. What that means is that they have stopped choosing to love the other person. Sometimes that happens because we have conflicts, sometimes it happens because they have chosen to love someone else, but it is always a choice.

The promises we make when we get married are promises to make that choice in the good times and the bad. Feelings matter, emotions matter, but the promise we make is not about those feelings. It is about a choice we make to love the other person no matter what.

The same thing is true of our relationship with God. There will be days when we really don’t feel like cracking open our Bible. So what do we do? Do we open our Bible anyway, or do we ignore it for a day?

When you don’t feel like praying, or you feel like there is a barrier between you and God, like he’s not even listening, what do you do? Do you pray anyway, or do you skip it and go on with your day?

When you’ve had a long Saturday night, maybe you were out with friends, maybe you worked hard doing yard work all day, maybe the kids kept you up at night. Do you come to worship anyway, or do you just skip it for a week?

Here’s the problem: you can skip reading your Bible for a day, you can skip praying for a bit, you can not come to worship for a week and your salvation is not in danger. We aren’t going to be graded on whether we had a perfect track record of reading our Bible’s each day. But it is so easy to let one day become two, pretty soon it becomes a week, then a month, and suddenly you look back and can’t remember the last time you spent time with God.

If we wait until we feel like worshiping, if we wait until we feel like spending time with God, then chances are pretty good that you’ll never be consistent in prayer. You’ll never be consistent in reading Scripture. You’ll never be consistent in worship. And pretty soon you’ll find that you are far from God because you did not choose to pursue him. You did not choose to love him.

Beth and I served at a small town church before we came to Agape. They had a hymnal, and a book of contemporary worship songs. The publishing date on that book was before either one of us were born. Not so contemporary after all. Worship was hard for a while. We both came from churches that had full bands, new contemporary worship, and songs we liked to sing. Worship was easy for us there.

But when we were singing hymns we didn’t know, trying to follow along with the music in the hymnal, sometimes singing with a piano or organ, and sometimes jut acapella because we had no one to play for us that day, and with only a handful of people, worship was hard.

You know what I found out? God is honored just as much by a joyful noise you make when you don’t feel like it as when your emotions are running high and you are carried along by the energy of a thousand people singing together at once. It might even be more honoring to God, because you are making the hard choice to worship the one who deserves all our worship, even when you don’t feel like it.

Worship singing out of the hymnals was not often an emotional experience, but it was glorifying to God. Most importantly, it was just was worshipful as what we do here on a Sunday morning, or what happened at the North American Christian Convention with thousands of people worshiping all at once.

That’s what happens when we make the choice to worship God even when we don’t feel like it, even when we aren’t excited about it, even when our feet are in the stocks, and we don’t think we’ll ever get out of the prison we’re trapped in.

We worship God in those times no matter what is happening to us, no matter what we feel, no matter what music we prefer, because what we do here is not about us. It is only about the God we worship. When you don’t feel like worshiping, make the hard choice to honor God anyway, and you will bring glory and honor to the one who deserves all our love, all our commitment, and all our worship no matter what.