

THREE MIDNIGHTS ... and the cries in the dark
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Midnight is not an ideal time to welcome visitors! It is hardly the opportune moment to entertain friends. Apart from the people who either prepare for the next day or whose job concerns the protection of others, midnight is the time when the world slumbers. A day with its opportunities has gone; the next with its possibilities has not yet arrived, and in between, for better or for worse, men sleep. Maybe this explains why, in Bible times, many things happened at midnight.

The midnight cry of grief (Exod. 12:29-30)

Pharaoh had been told repeatedly of approaching disaster, but persistently he ignored the warnings of Moses. He refused to liberate his slaves and in defiance of God's commands deliberately increased their burdens. Men emulating this example can only blame themselves when disaster arrives. It was at that time God instituted the Passover, and two things stand out in bold relief. The first was a change in the calendar! We have no way of knowing at what time of the year or what week of the month all the events took place; we only know that God abruptly changed the calendar and commanded His people to begin a new year. The second concerned the manner in which the Hebrews celebrated the feast. "And thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste: it is the Lord's passover" (Exod. 12: 1 1). Obviously the participants were to be ready to leave immediately. The midnight hour was about to strike, and the Hebrews were expected to walk by faith into a new life. It was the beginning of a new year! Soon cries of anguish would re-echo throughout Egypt, for the judgment of God was about to slay the firstborn of every family. The Egyptians had wasted their final opportunity to gain favor with God; their belated repentance would be too late to prevent a catastrophe. When Pharaoh and his legions died in the surging waters of the Red Sea, evidence was supplied that God meant what He said.

The midnight cry of gratitude (Acts 16:25)

The prison at Philippi was very dark and silent. Most of the inmates were either asleep or trying to sleep. The guards were at ease, but for two men slumber was elusive. The day had been eventful, for a crowd had tried to murder them. The aching backs of the prisoners bore eloquent testimony to the pain inflicted by lashing whips. Paul and Silas had delivered a demon-possessed girl and by so doing had enraged the despicable men who used her to increase their riches. Infuriated because their dupe had escaped, the citizens dragged the preachers to the town square, where a riot had been incited. The shouting and accusations were still ringing in the minds of the preachers, and every movement of their bodies reminded them of the merciless thrashing that had lacerated their backs. Most men would have questioned the wisdom and kindness of God. Why had He permitted this to happen to His faithful servants? Perhaps it was then that Paul whispered to Silas, "Let's sing." "And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. " When God heard the songs of His servants, He summoned the forces of nature to provide an accompaniment for their praise. "And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed" (v. 26). Did the other inmates of the prison curse, shout, complain, or marvel? Probably they had never heard singing at midnight, unless one of their companions somehow had obtained enough liquor to get drunk! There had to be a reason why men in pain could sing in the dark! There was; they were not alone; the risen Christ was with them and His grace was sufficient!

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The midnight cry of gladness (Matt. 25:6)

"And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him." This parable of Jesus was easily understood by listeners, for such scenes were commonplace in Israel. It was customary for friends of the bridegroom to meet and accompany him to the place where the ceremony would take place. If the bridegroom came from a distance, often it was necessary to meet him at night, and then the welcoming party carried lanterns. Sometimes, when the exact hour of arrival was unknown, the friends would sleep, but they were always waiting to hear the cry, "Behold, the bridegroom cometh."

Jesus deliberately took a commonplace incident and clothed it with eternal truth. Someday He would be married! He would woo and win His bride and then come from His Father's home to claim His beloved - the church. Constantly he emphasized that no one knew the precise moment when this would take place but stressed the fact that His followers should remain ready. Conditions would deteriorate in the world, and darkness would prevail among nations. His disciples should never despair. Nation would rise against nation, and unfortunately, many saints would suffer and die for their faith. Great would be their reward. The others who remained were to be faithful and watching, for in such an hour as they thought not the Son of man would come. Then suffering would be overshadowed by the marriage of the Lamb; the hardships encountered along the road of life would be forgotten when the bride met the divine Bridegroom to remain with Him eternally.

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