

“A JAILER IS SET FREE BY THOSE IN JAIL.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

April 25, 2021, 9 and 10:30 AM

Scripture Texts: Acts 16:25-40

Introduction.

Our text is filled with strange things, unnatural things, things outside of our experience or expectations.

Tortured prisoners singing at midnight.

Earthquakes opening doors and undoing chains and shackles.

Guards prepared to kill themselves.

Prisoners who stop guards from killing themselves, rather than making a run for it.

A hardened Roman soldier who wants to be saved.

Middle of the night family baptisms.

Prisoners being set free but refusing to leave.

This morning we will consider some of the strange actions of Paul and Silas and some of the strange actions of the Roman jailer.

Acts 16:22-24, Suffering from many blows.

Let's remember where we left off last week. Paul and Silas had received a horrific punishment, dragged, stripped, severely flogged, beaten with rods to within an inch of their life, bloodied, bruised and broken, thrown into prison without a trial, without due process.

They were put in maximum security prison, an inner prison, no windows, a dark, foul smelling dungeon with human waste and rats. They are put in stocks and chains, making every movement most miserable. They were treated like the very worst of criminals.

When I read accounts like this it makes me wonder why do we shrink back from bearing a simple witness for Jesus? We are not being called to stand up to tanks, or threats on our life or livelihood.

Our culture has a difficult time believing there can be good purposes in suffering so the idea of enduring pain for the sake of truth seems strange. There is no such thing as purposeless pain for a Christian. There is always cause for hope, peace, confidence in the sovereign goodness of God.

When the faithful suffer persecution for the Gospel, God is glorified, the saints and angels take notice and the Gospel is shown to be a treasure of highest value, worthy of all suffering, even death.

Just as Jesus turned the cross into a great triumph for the glory of God, and grace of God, so Jesus will turn every rod, every whip, every prison, every torture into a triumph over Satan.

Acts 16:25-28, Songs in the night.

Who does this? How is this possible? Is this even real?

They have been beaten, stripped, humiliated. They are miserable, uncomfortable. Why aren't they crying, moaning, doubting, defeated? There is only one way this is possible.

When the realities about God exceed the realities of their miserable circumstances. And that has been true about believers all over the world for many millennia.

Many of the Psalms are prayers rising out of pain, sorrow, trouble, anguish that turn into songs of praise of the living God.

Many of the Black African spirituals rose out of suffering in slavery, but expressing a greater hope of a better future.

Christians in crisis have often turned to song to give expression to the depths of their souls.

We can sing because we believe God is in control of our worst circumstances and is at work through them for our ultimate good. Joy in God in the midst of suffering shows the supreme value of God and the supremacy of Christ and His Gospel.

Permanent truths triumph over temporary feelings. This is why Paul could later speak of being sorrowful but always rejoicing (II Corinthians 6:10). Singing enables us to overcome the subjective feelings tormenting our minds.

Job 13:15 Though he slay me, yet will I praise Him, love Him.

Paul and Silas want to make bold confession that they are not shamed or humiliated, they are not ashamed of the Gospel or of their God. They make open confession of the goodness of their God, of the beauty and power of their cause, their defense of the Gospel.

They considered it an honor to be counted worthy by God to suffer for the name of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who had suffered so much more for them.

Sometimes the battles of faith are fought with songs. Bitterness over misfortunes can be faced down with singing and prayer. This is surely a better path than bitterness, anger, revenge, self-pity, or some mind-numbing entertainment or drug of choice.

The eternal truths of God will do far more to cleanse our minds and hearts than trivial temptations. We need the perspective of God's sovereignty.

A great earthquake.

God sends a great earthquake that shakes the foundations of the prison. An earthquake that opens doors and releases chains but doesn't cause cave ins or roofs to collapse. It is a miracle.

How crazy is it that Paul and Silas stay put. Didn't the earthquake happen to let them out? Why not make a run for it? Why not let the jailer kill himself and escape?

God opened the doors not to let them out but to open the jailers heart.

Acts 16:29-34, Fear and trembling.

Acts 16:29-30 ... trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Why trembling with fear? What is he afraid of? The earthquake? And why did he draw his sword to kill himself?

Let's briefly answer the second question first.

The short answer is because he was a man, a man's man and the number one trait of a man is he takes responsibility for himself and others. Under Roman military code, if prisoners escape, he is accountable, he is responsible. Never mind that the earthquake was an act of God, that he was not to blame. This was an act not only of duty, but of virtue.

But let's move to the larger question. When Paul cried out to not kill himself, why did the jailer come to him trembling with fear? The initial threat to his own life was gone, he should have been elated, beside himself with joy, he didn't have to die, his life was spared.

Who is this jailer? What is he like?

He is a Roman jailer, probably a retired soldier, he is a co-conspirator with the rulers and magistrates in this punishment. He knows how to inflict pain and might even have a sadistic pleasure in doing so, after all these prisoners deserve it.

He is a proud man, and a man full of contempt for the scum of the earth he has to deal with every day, criminals, lawless lowlifes. He is calloused, jaded, unfeeling. He cares nothing about them.

He leads a Roman jailers life. He gets his pay check, lives for the weekends, eats, drinks, parties. Then starts over, gets paid, lives for the next weekend, eats, drinks, parties. Sleeps it off, and goes back to work. He gives himself over to sinful desires, lust, greed, sloth, pride, hate, envy, living himself.

And why does he live this way? To silence his conscience, to drown out the inner voice of God, to suppress the truth written in his heart.

Such hearts are hard, stone, in complete bondage to the sin they love. Their impenitent hearts are storing up wrath for the day of God's wrath. They are immovable *except* by the power of God.

But God.

One day he gets two of the strangest prisoners ever, who sing and pray to a living God. No doubt they spoke forgiveness to him, they didn't curse him when he threw them into the deepest dungeon and shackle their bloody, bruised arms and legs and left them in the most miserable, uncomfortable condition.

Suddenly an earthquake happens, and it's not just the doors that are opened, but his eyes are opened and he sees the condition of his soul in the light of the Gospel that has been lived and sung and prayed before him that night.

All of a sudden, he sees himself as a dead man walking, and he trembles. He trembles from the fear of God, he trembles from the fear of the just and righteous wrath of God, of the judgment that awaits him, of the prison and punishment that he deserves. He sees himself as the one who is in true bondage, and the ones in bondage are the most free.

He trembles over his lost soul, he trembles over his sin, he trembles over the holiness of God. His conscience declares him guilty. He knows his wickedness under the conviction of the Holy Spirit. He sees his guilt in how he has thought about and treated these servants of God.

The reality of his lost condition and the weight of God's judgment is so real, so palpable, so clear that he wastes no time and rushes in and falls down before them and cries out to them, "Sirs, *what must I do to be saved?*"

The dreadfulness of the condition of his soul and the prospect of an eternal judgment that he deserves makes him a desperate man. Desperate men do desperate things. He must have this salvation or he will die.

That's what the jailer experienced and now he begs to be told the truth, the hell-delivering, soul-saving, life-transforming truth.

What a glorious questions he asks. What must I do to be saved?

He remembers the words of the slave girl, they are servants of the Most High God and the message they proclaim is the message of salvation. These men are not criminals, they have something to offer that is better than the Roman customs, traditions and religions.

What a deliverance for this jailer. He should be dead, first by his own sword and then by his own sin, but miraculously he is still alive. God has spared him, rescued him, saved him.

The jailer could not have a more sympathetic counselor than the Apostle Paul. Paul himself had once been a persecutor, he had himself once thrown people in prison, he had himself once been knock to the ground and trembled with the fear of the Lord.

The jailer is us. Just living our life, going to school, going to work, going through the routine of our daily lives, looking forward to the next day off or vacation or retirement. This is the condition of the natural man, of the human condition. We are blind to our spiritual condition. We are ignorant of our sin and the wages of our sin.

II Corinthians 4:4 The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Have we kept God at a safe distance, just as a friend, an acquaintance, someone on our level?
Do we keep God on our terms or will we have Him on His terms?
The fear of God is the one thing that should make everyone tremble.

Have we ever truly trembled at our spiritual condition? Have we ever trembled from a fear of sin, a hated of our sin, of the holiness of God, over a God who is a consuming fire?

Job had an encounter with God and He was utterly undone, he was humble by the presence of a holy God. The fear of the Lord fell on him and he repented in dust and ashes (Job 42:6).

Isaiah saw a vision of God in the temple. In the presence of a holy God, he was overwhelmed by the awareness of his sin. Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5).

Peter had a profound encounter with Jesus involving a miraculous catch of fish.

Luke 5:8 When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

We are dead in our trespasses and sins, carrying out the desires of our flesh and by very nature children of God's wrath, but without any fear or trembling, until God in His mercy by His Spirit opens our blind eyes, awakens our cold dark souls.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

There come those moments when we ought to be overawed by God, His power, His majesty, His splendor, His presence, His holiness, when the fear of the Lord comes over us and we tremble, and flee to Jesus and cast ourselves on Him to be saved.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

It is a short statement, a short creed, but it is packed with truth and meaning.

There is nothing for the jailer to do, for everything has been done for him by Christ on the cross. All that remains is for him to believe this by faith. Jesus is the way of salvation. He is believed and received by faith.

Romans 10:11, 13 For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” ... 13 For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Acts 4:12 There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Luke summarizes what follows, Paul and Silas spoke further to the jailer from the Word of God, explaining all that is necessary to believe concerning Christ, who He is and what He did, and His cross and the way of the cross and salvation and forgiveness.

And he gave evidence in his life his faith was real, his life was changed. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace.

In love the jailer washes Paul and Silas’ wounds and ministers to them, and feeds them. His heart and his home are filled with joy, like he has never known before, like he never knew in all his pagan pleasures. Those are empty now, now he is full.

A hardened Roman jailer, proud, arrogant, calloused, rough and coarse, is changed. Before he was about to kill himself, before he trembled in fear, how he is changed, caring for others.

Faith leads to joy. This is the joy of a clean conscience, a conscience made right with God, a conscience free from fear. This is the peace of God. This is cause for singing.

Conclusion.

Don’t despise your suffering, you don’t know the cosmic purposes of God and how He is using it for His glory and to advance His Gospel. Paul wrote often of the purpose of his suffering.

Can you imagine years later the Roman Philippian jailer reading to the congregation the letter from Paul from a jail in Rome.

Philippians 1:12-14 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

I Peter 2:12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Don't underestimate your actions, how you talk to others, how you treat your friends, your husband, wife, kids, discipline, integrity at work, perhaps most of all how you handle adversity and trials.

May we all live and act in a way that says,

Romans 1:16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Prayer: Holy Father, send your Spirit upon us I pray and grant us a glimpse of the glory that awaits as we patiently bear these light and momentary trials in this life. Enable us to trust our souls to our faithful Savior who suffered and died, not so we wouldn't have to, but so that our suffering might be redemptive and fruitful and lead to glory.