

"Jail House Rocked"

Security, Peace and Fear – part #4

Acts 16:16-34

This is the fourth week of our series on Security, Peace, and Fear. I have to admit, I'm going to miss talking about the prophet Elijah and the challenges he faced. However, this week we turn our attention to Paul and Silas in Philippi, as we see how they responded to a frightening situation as recorded in Acts 16.

There are few places that scare me as much as jails and prisons. I remember as a child, the sheriff actually gave us a quick tour of the Losco County jail. Some of the inmates apparently saw us coming, because I distinctly remember some of them jumping up to the windows and saying, "Boo!" They would not let inmates see children today – in fact, the last time I took my Cub Scouts to the county jail, we only stayed in the juvenile detention room. Still, seeing the handcuffs, the isolation room, and the sparse furnishings all communicated one thing: you don't want to end up here.

Losing our freedom and being locked away would be upsetting, to say the least. Are there others things in life that make us anxious? How about being injured, or being attacked? Physical harm ranks right up there with my freedom being taken away. If either of those things happened, it would be a very bad day.

I submit to you that Paul and Silas were having a very bad day. And the thing is, it started out so well. They were following Jesus, preaching the word, meeting with faithful Jews in Philippi who responded to their message, welcomed them into their homes and were baptized. Acts 16 starts the way we like all churches to start. A missionary comes to town, preaches a message of forgiveness, and the people believe and start following Jesus. Excellent.

But no church ever starts without a struggle. Starting at verse 16, we see that Paul and Silas were doing the right thing, preaching the way of salvation. Even the demons recognized this. But Paul was so fed up with the distraction of this prophetic slave girl that he rebuked the spirit right out of her. Check this out: Paul healed the girl of a demonic possession. That is a good thing! And as the saying goes, no good deed is left unpunished.

The girl's owners had no concern for her wellbeing. They just wanted to make money off of her. They were very ticked off at Paul and Silas for ending their lucrative business, so they hauled the two missionaries off before the authorities, formed a mob to stir up trouble, and eventually had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in prison.

The details of what happened to these two are appalling. They were "seized" and "dragged to the [public] marketplace"(v.19), falsely accused of stirring up trouble, "stripped and beaten with rods" (v.23), thrown into the "inner cell" of the prison, and had their feet fastened in stocks (v.24). You know what stocks are, right? Those crazy wooden devices they torture people with. In Wild West tourist parks you can have your picture taken in them. But in reality, they are anything but cute.

This has to be the worst, most frightening day ever for Paul and Silas. They were being obedient to God. They were sharing the good news. And as a reward, they were beaten and placed, in stocks, in the absolute worst part of the prison, under heavy guard. Have you ever had a day like that? I haven't. Not even close. I can think of several bad, painful days I have lived through, and if Paul were here, he'd tell me, I have it made in the shade compared to him. In fact, he does say so himself in 2 Corinthians 11:23: "I have worked much harder, been in prison more

frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.”

I want you to do me a favor. Think about the worst day you have ever had. Whatever it was, for just a moment, go back to that place and time. Remember the pain, the anxiety, and the frustration you felt. Got it? Now, listen to what Paul and Silas did in the Philippian prison, as they sat there, beaten, bruised, and unable to even move their sore legs.

Acts 16:25. “About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God...”

Wait, what? They were praying and singing? I mean, I can understand the praying – they needed help. But singing praises to God? That is the most unusual response to a bad day that I can imagine. So now, let’s finish the passage and see what happens as a response to their incredible optimism and faithfulness in the face of suffering, injustice and fear.

Acts 16:25-34

This story is amazing! This passage alone, starting at verse 25, is an incredible story in and of itself. A jailer being saved because of the witness of his prisoners! But it’s even more astounding when you think of what Paul and Silas went through before the earthquake. It is because of their witness that the jailer and his whole household hear the gospel and respond to the grace of Jesus Christ. Wow!

So can I ask you, what would you have done? If you were beaten, locked away without a fair trial, and had your legs immobilized by a painful torture device, would you be singing and praising God? Maybe, maybe not. Let’s assume that we really are that much in love with God, though. Go with me down this

imaginary road for a moment. You are praying, praising, and asking for deliverance, and suddenly, an earthquake opens the doors and breaks your chains. What do you do next? You run! Obviously! Come on, it's obvious that this is a miracle for your freedom! Almost the same thing happens to Peter in Acts 12, and he walked out of the prison.

This is troubling. Why didn't Paul and Silas bolt? What do you think?

I think Paul knew something about Roman law that we might have overlooked. It's right there in verse 27. The jailer woke up, took one look at the wide-open prison doors, and was about to commit suicide by falling on his own sword. This might seem strange to you, but the jailer's job was to keep the prisoners locked up, and if he failed, the authorities wouldn't say, “Oh, too bad. Try better next time.” No, they would kill him.

Paul and Silas stayed in the prison because they loved this man and did not want him to die. This is true love for our enemies. Jesus taught in Matthew 5:44 to “love your neighbor and pray for those who persecute you” – even if it means staying in prison when you could walk out.

The Bible tells us numerous times to repay evil with good:

1 Peter 3:9 - “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

Romans 12:21 – “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Matthew 5:39 – “But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.”

Joseph said to his brothers who had sold him into slavery (Genesis 50:20) – "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

It was not the miraculous earthquake that convinced the jailer of the truth of Jesus. It was the fact that Paul and Silas risked their freedom, their very lives, by staying in that horrible inner cell long enough to share their witness with this man. The irony is this: the gospel, not the prisoners, broke out. The jailer, not Paul and Silas, needed to experience freedom.

Can you imagine? This jailer falls at the feet of those whom he previously bound. He addresses them respectfully, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas answer, "Believe in Jesus." And then, to solidify his response as a true follower of Jesus, the jailer washes the wounds which he himself inflicted. He brings Paul and Silas into his own home, feeds them, and allows them to baptize him and his whole household. None of this would have happened if Paul and Silas had taken their one God-given opportunity to be free.

I think that Paul and Silas were praying for this jailer and his household. I think they were praying for all the prisoners that could hear them singing praises to God. Paul and Silas knew what it takes to bring someone the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do we? How often are we complaining about little things that frustrate us? Do you know what happens when we do that? People don't see Jesus. They see anxious, grumpy, defeated Christians. There are so many things we could complain about, and they all pale in comparison to the day that Paul and Silas had.

My friends, we must not let it be so. We must determine ourselves to be people of joy, no matter what the circumstances. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says "give

thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." In all things, give thanks, even if we don't see the immediate benefit. Could it be possible that God is using your difficult situation right now to save someone else? It was true for Paul and Silas. Why not us, too?

Paul, the expert in pain and injustice, says this in Philippians 4:4-7. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Think about what these words meant to the church in Philippi who saw this miracle. When Paul rejoiced, God's peace was on him in such a mighty way that everyone noticed. That's how their church started. That's the way God wants our church to be, as well.

Next time you think you're having a bad day, remember Paul and Silas, and simply ask God, "Show me how this struggle can be used for your glory to save others." Amen.

Memory Verse: Psalm 42:8

"By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life."