

The Jailer of Philippi: Jesus Sovereign Over Prison Doors

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[0 : 00] Let's turn now to God's Word, and we're back in Acts chapter 16, and if you have one of the visitor Bibles, you'll find it on page 925. Acts 16, and we're reading from verse 25.

We've been looking at this chapter the last few weeks, looking at these three portraits of salvation as the gospel comes to Europe. Firstly, with the merchant of Thyatira, Lydia, and then the slave girl. And it was that incident with the slave girl that has ended up with Paul and Silas being dragged before the magistrates of the city there in Philippi and sent to the prison.

So here's where we're picking up the story in verse 25. About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened.

[1 : 14] When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, do not harm yourself, for we are all here.

And the jailer called for lights and rushed in. And trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

And they said, believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. And he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them.

And he rejoiced, along with his entire household, that he had believed in God. But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, let those men go.

[2 : 22] And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, the magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore, come out now and go in peace. But Paul said to them, they have beaten us publicly, uncondemned men who are Roman citizens, and they've thrown us into prison.

And do they now throw us out secretly? No. Let them come themselves and take us out. Amen. The police reported these words to the magistrates. And they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens.

So they came and apologized to them and took them out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.

Amen. May the Lord have blessed to us his word this evening. Amen. May the Lord have blessed to have Acts 16 open in front of you.

So please do turn to that, page 925. If you have one of the Vista Bibles there. Now, this is a truly remarkable story from every angle.

[3 : 42] No matter which way you look at it, it is a remarkable story. You have Paul and Silas at the receiving end of a total injustice, finding themselves in the maximum security wing of the local jail.

And they're there singing away, full of joy. It's remarkable. You have a hardened jailer, likely a retired military man.

He's brought to his knees and comes to saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. He and his whole household. Truly remarkable. Then you have the earthquake, which strikes in the middle of the night and bursts open the jail, which leads to the most anticlimactic jailbreak story ever.

No one escapes. It's the remarkable conclusion to a remarkable chapter. If you flick back a few pages, a few paragraphs, and Paul and his mission team, they're there in Asia, hitting roadblock

after roadblock, dead end after dead end.

And against all their expectations, they find themselves in Europe, in Philippi. And in a remarkable few days in Philippi, the foundation of the first Christian church in Europe is established, and it comprises of a very surprising collection of individuals from across the social spectrum.

[5 : 00] You have the rich merchant woman, this slave girl, and the Philippian jailer. And the path to bringing all these individuals to faith is not a straight one, and certainly not one that you or I would choose.

You've got demon possession, a serious miscarriage of justice, and a stint in jail. But through all of it, through all of these events, God was at work.

And through his mysterious ways, he was bringing his purposes to fruition, performing his wonders. And this chapter ought to give you and I great confidence in the great gospel mission that Jesus called all of us to.

Great confidence because of what he does. And his great sovereignty, bringing these individuals to saving faith. There are hundreds of thousands of people in our city who are, at the moment, dead in sin, destined not for an eternity praising God in the new creation, but an eternity without him, an eternity in hell.

And because that is so, our great priority must be, mustn't it, as we heard this morning, to seek to reach as many of those folk as possible. That is our great task as his church.

[6 : 22] And we want to see not just a trickle of folk coming to Christ, but many. We want more than we can handle. And to some, that idea seems a little daunting.

It's a big task. But to others, it represents a huge opportunity. There are many people outside these doors who need to hear the gospel. And the great comfort, the great reassurance from these three portraits of salvation in Acts 16, the great comfort is that God is sovereign in salvation.

It's not down to you or me. It's him. He is the one who is at work bringing people to saving faith. And he will be at work bringing all sorts of people, bringing them to salvation.

And he'll use us to that end, remarkably. He'll use people like you and me to do that. Now, it may look very confusing at times, as it did for Paul and his mission team, getting bounced around Asia.

What's going on? It may look very confusing to us at times. It may be very painful for us. But the Lord is in control. That's the key thing we see through this chapter.

[7 : 36] He can and he may move people continents. Even place them in jail in order to bring gospel advance. Well, let's look at this final portrait of salvation here in chapter 16.

We'll look at it from two perspectives. We'll look at it first from the perspective of the Philippian jailer himself. And then we'll look at it from Paul and Silas' point of view. So first, the Philippian jailer.

And we see in this chapter, he is brought to a moment of desperate crisis in order to seek for salvation. It's a very dramatic and swift conversion for the Philippian jailer, isn't it?

Quite the contrast to Lydia. Who had clearly for some time been in and around God's people, familiar with the Old Testament scriptures. She'd had exposure over time.

But the jailer, he's turned around in a night. Now who knows what he's heard in the days leading up to this earth-shattering evening. Perhaps he's heard about these folk arriving into town.

[8 : 43] Perhaps he's heard the slave girl's shouts. Remember, that slave girl was following Paul and Silas day after day shouting. Maybe he heard her. Maybe he's heard about the trial where Paul and Silas were thrown into prison.

Maybe he was there. At the very least, he probably heard something of their singing and praising in the cell. Verse 25. Many of the other prisoners certainly heard.

Maybe he heard it too. But regardless of what he had heard, the Lord brought him to the very edge of himself. He placed him in the darkest moment of his life.

He was preparing himself for the end. He had literally drawn his sword and was about to fall on it. And it was there, in that moment of desperate crisis, that salvation was in the end sought.

How was it that this tough, likely former soldier, how was it that this man was brought to his knees to utter those words in verse 30?

[9 : 53] What must I do to be saved? How did that happen? How did he get to that point? Well, the evening started out, I'm sure, like a very regular sort of evening in the Macedonian Central Correction Facility.

I'm sure it looked like every other evening. He's been to the local magistrates. He's secured and transferred the latest batch of prisoners, included these two out-of-towners, Paul and Silas, two

Jews.

And he's brought them to the prison and placed them in the high-security wing, the inner prison. He's fastened them in the stocks. So far, so normal for the jailer, just like any other night. But then things start to get a little strange. There's singing and praying coming from the depths of the high-security unit.

What's going on, he thought, I'm sure. Why are they singing to God? They're in prison. What's there to shout about? Well, it looks like he headed to bed and got to sleep.

[10:59] But before too long, the ground beneath him literally shook. Verse 26. Suddenly, there was a great earthquake. So the foundations of the prison were shaken. He started awake.

He wakes up. And once he's recovered from the initial shock and regained his balance, his first thought, I'm sure, was to secure the prison. Check for any damage that may have been caused to make sure the integrity of the prison hasn't been breached.

Imagine his horror when he saw all the doors open, everyone's bonds unfastened. That is the last thing you want to see as a Roman jailer in charge of a prison, to see the doors suddenly sprung open.

And all these less than savory characters suddenly free. It's the last person you want to meet, isn't it? You've had them under lock and key for years. Suddenly they're free. Not only was your job on the line, but your very life, your very existence.

That's why he reaches for a sword. Look at verse 27. When he woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword. Was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

[12:15] He knows the game's up. He knows his future is totally shattered. He knows the death sentence. It was absolutely inexcusable, unacceptable for a Roman prison guard to let that happen to his prison.

If one prisoner went, that was it, let alone all of them. And he has, in the blink of an eye, had to come face to face with his own mortality.

What an unimaginably terrible moment that would have been for him, don't you think? He's woken up in the night, and he's reaching for his sword. Now this man needed, as every person on this planet needs, to know the God who made him.

To know the forgiveness of sin and the certainty of everlasting life. He needed salvation. And for him, there was no better way of making him realize his need than by the Lord bringing this earthquake that would make him feel most acutely his own insecurity in this life.

To make him feel his immediate need to be right with whatever God was out there. He was brought to the absolute end of himself. And he was face to face with his own death.

[13:32] The sword was ready. He was ready to fall on it. Reality and eternity for that man was suddenly very real. Very plain.

Listen to how one preacher draws out the implications for us. He says, perhaps the supreme value of the story for us is that it draws aside the veil.

And allows us to see life as it really is. Shorn of all its illusions, barriers and distractions. And stripped down to its basic fundamentals. Eternity is not a state of existence beyond this earthly life. Some far off shadowy thing too remote from the present to worry about. But rather it's something right there at our side. Touching us at every point. Where are we but conscious of the fact?

He goes on. All that separates us from eternity is a thin partition of time and sense. So thin that one might swear sometimes that one could hear whispers from the other side.

[14:40] And in this instance, the whispers became a voice of thunder. That unnerved and all but unhinged the up until now careless and callous jailer.

How quickly and unexpectedly God can reduce a man like that from total indifference to trembling terror.

He was brought face to face with his eternity. But the great and wonderful thing is that the God who is able to do that. The God who can reduce even the toughs of men to a trembling wreck.

That God is also incredibly gentle. And tender. And full of grace. He did this. He brought this man to this point.

So that he would know salvation. You can imagine there. Saw drawn. He's ready to fall on it.

[15:38] And he hears a voice coming from inside the jail. Do not harm yourself. We're all here. You can imagine the relief he must have experienced at that moment.

No one's escaped. I'm delivered from judgment of death, he must have thought to himself. Saved. By these prisoners choosing to remain in the prison when they could have just walked out. But something of even greater significance than the saving of his temporal life now occupies his mind. He's perhaps been brought face to face with greater realities.

And so as he rushes in to see these men in the prison. And he comes trembling before Paul. Trembling with fear. Look at the question he asks him there. Verse 30.

Sirs, what must I do to be saved? Now his question must be, I think, more than simply salvation from the physical death he feared.

[16:43] When he thought all those prisoners had escaped. That danger has now passed, hasn't it? All the prisoners are accounted for. No one's escaped. That judgment has gone. So he is answering and asking a deeper question.

Perhaps he's heard what these men are up to. He's heard about the exorcism. Heard their words of prayer and singing. He's perhaps not heard much, but he's heard enough.

And then he's experienced this earth-shattering earthquake. And the extraordinary non-escape of all the prisoners. He's perhaps now all too aware that there is a higher power to whom he needs salvation from.

The real and living God has suddenly broken in upon him. And he now knows that he must face him. He knows that he needs salvation.

That's why I asked that question. Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And the Lord will sometimes do that in people's lives.

[17:48] He will sometimes bring them to this point where they are literally trembling and on their knees and crying out for mercy. Sometimes he'll do that in your life or in the lives of those you love and care for.

Maybe that's your experience even at this moment. Things have happened in your life in recent days and weeks. The real God, the mighty sovereign God of all creation invades your life.

All your pre-conceived notions crumble. And you realize that you're broken and trembling before him. Well, don't waste that humbling.

The Philippian jailer didn't. Turn to him. Turn to him for salvation. That is your only hope. And what words of comfort these must have been to that jailer.

Verse 31. Paul and Silas replied to him. And they said, Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

[18:56] You and your households. What wonderful words those must have been. And it wasn't just good news for him. But for all those he loved.

His whole household. And so Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to him. Verse 32. And to all who were in his house. And right there and then there's a total transformation.

As this man comes to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus. Look at what he does there in verse 33. The man who he had thrown into prison only a few hours earlier. Those he had shackled and stocks.

He now takes to his own home. Tends to their bleeding backs. Feeds them. He and his household are baptized. What an extraordinary turnaround.

In the life of that man. Extraordinary story. An evening that sat out. Much like any other one. Was totally turned on its head.

[19:55] And the jailer was looking at disaster in the face. He's looking at the end of his own life. But then he comes face to face with the living God. And it's an evening that ends. In rejoicing.

Verse 34. He rejoiced along with his entire household. That he had believed in God. Isn't that an incredible evening?

The second. Christian household in Europe. What wonderful joy for the jailer. Of course and indeed for Paul and Silas. They've seen this remarkable turnaround.

It was quite an evening for them as well. What seemed initially like defeat. Now turns out to have been God's strategy. For seeking and saving the jailer. God turned this apparently.

Conclusive disaster. Into a great triumph of grace. The imprisonment. It turns out. Was all to bring that man to salvation. Looked like disaster.

[20:56] Turned into a triumph. So let's look at this extraordinary story. From their perspective now. From the viewpoints. Of Paul and Silas. And we see that here. That they are brought.

To a place of dark and suffering. In order to bring the word of salvation. Now for Paul and Silas. It began that day.

It began earlier in the chapter. With them casting out demons. It ends up. With Paul and Silas being cast into prison. Now to most onlookers.

To those in Philippi at the time. And the rest of Paul's small mission team. I'm sure that this looked like a pretty spectacular failure. But as Luke the writer is making clear.

Far from being a disaster. This whole event was orchestrated by God. In order to bring that jailer to saving faith. Without Paul and Silas.

[21 : 52] Being thrust. Right there into the heart of that prison. The extraordinary events that unfolded there. That jailer would never have come to faith. He would have continued to walk in darkness.

Dead in sin. This was the best way. For that jailer to hear the gospel. For that to happen. God's gospel servants.

Had to be brought to this place of dark and suffering. In order. To be in the right place at the right time. To speak the good news of the gospel to that man. It took a miscarriage of justice.

It meant bleeding backs. It meant feet in the stocks. Couldn't there have been another way? A better way? For this jailer to come to faith?

Surely there was another way to do it. But in God's wisdom there wasn't. This was the way. It meant great suffering and darkness for his servants.

[22 : 49] But great joy for the jailer. But if we struggle to grasp this story. And how it all happens. If we find it hard to believe that it had to be this way.

Then we're going to struggle to grasp a far bigger story. Of a story of infinitely greater miscarriages of justice. Of beatings and darkness. If we struggle with this story.

Then we're going to struggle with the very heart of the gospel itself. You see the gospel claims. That the creator of the whole universe. The God who cast a billion billion stars into the sky.

The one who created this planet that we live on. The one who created every human being that's ever lived. The one who sustains you at this very moment. The one who did all that. Handed over his incarnate son.

By his purpose and foreknowledge into the hands of sinful men. To suffer an unjust trial. To be abused and endure physical violence.

[23 : 57] And in the end the agonies of crucifixion. And all this. He did. On behalf of this. Tiny planet that we live on.

Amongst all the billions of galaxies out there. He did it. Personally. For the Philippian jailer. For you. For me. And that surely.

Is the most difficult thing to grasp. In all the gospel isn't it? That God would do that. But endure darkened suffering for you and me. It was through great suffering.

That God brought salvation to you and me. It is beyond our comprehension. It's perplexing. But it's also a pattern.

And as his people. We are now called. As we take the gospel to a lost world. To be prepared to share in that suffering. In fact.

[25 : 00] It may even be through the very suffering. That we fear. That the Lord will work salvation in someone's life. We are. The apostle Paul would urge us. To count it a privilege.

To share in Christ's sufferings. It's partly why this episode is here. Sharing us the reality of suffering. For the gospel advance. And Paul himself would later write.

To this very church in Philippi. The one that included Lydia. And this jailer. He would write them a letter. And this is what he said. I want you to know brothers.

That what has happened to me. Has really served to advance the gospel. So that it has become known. Throughout the whole imperial guard. And to all the rest. That my imprisonment.

Is for Christ. See Paul sees his suffering. In light. Of the advance of the gospel. When he encourages those in Philippi. To be of the same mind.

[25 : 58] To see their own sufferings. In that same light. Later on in the letter. He writes this. For it has been granted to you.

That for the sake of Christ. You should not only believe in him. But also suffer for his sake. Engaged in the same conflict. You saw I had. And now here that I still have.

So Paul writes to those Philippian believers. This first church in Europe. And he says follow me. They were to follow Paul. Who in turn followed Christ. And we too as Christians living today. Are to likewise follow. The Philippian example. We are to follow Paul. As he follows Christ. And be willing to endure suffering. Even rejoice in it. For through our sufferings. Jesus will advance. [26 : 57] His gospel. He will bring about. His great purposes. For his great church building project. That is what he's doing in the world. And he may.

In his sovereignty. Bring us to places of great darkness. In order to bring his word of salvation. To one individual. That may be his way. Folk. That we would never have otherwise reached. If it wasn't for our own personal darkness. He may use that. So whether it's an illness. Whether it's a bereavement. Whether it's an unemployment. Maybe even prison. Whatever personal darkness we endure. He may use it. For the salvation of maybe just one person. So whatever it may be. Remember the Lord is sovereign. And it's our great privilege to serve him. [27 : 58] No matter where he might lead us. We can trust him. And rejoice in him. Even in those moments. Even as Paul and Silas could sing praise there in that prison.

Because pain in this world. For a time. Is sometimes often the route to eternal joy for someone else. Paul's pain here. Silas's pain here. Led to great joy. Didn't it? For that Philippian jailer. And perhaps great pain for you. Will lead to joy. Real joy. Eternal joy. For someone else. The risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ reigns. And he's sovereign. He is sovereign in salvation. We've seen that through this chapter. He will build his church. Just as he promised. He's sovereign over people's hearts. [28 : 57] He's sovereign over the powers of darkness. He's sovereign over prison doors. And it is his mission work. He is powerful to save.

And transform the lives of those that we would write off. Who would have picked these three individuals here in Acts 16? I don't think I would have. But he's sovereign. And he calls us. Even people like you and me. To join him in that great work. You and I are part of his ever-growing mission team. Each one of us here. Is a missionary in our own local context. So you may be the missionary to your local primary school. Where your children go. You're the missionary on your street. Your Bocca Flats. Your office. That is your mission field. And so as we remember. That God is sovereign. We're to be in prayer. [29 : 53] Praying for three folk. Once a week for a minute. Pray that God. The God who is sovereign in salvation. Will be at work in their lives. In their hearts.

And that he might use. Even you and me. To bring them to salvation. To introduce them. To Jesus. Salvation belongs. To our God. And he sits. On the throne. He is sovereign. And so we can trust him. We can trust him. As we think about our great. Task. Our great mission work. That's the big message. Of Acts 16. Jesus sovereign in salvation. Well let's pray. Before we close with our final hymn. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Father. [30 : 57] You know. How overwhelmed. We can often feel. As we look out. On a lost world. A lost city.

But what great comfort it is to know. That it doesn't depend on us. Because you're the one who's sovereign. And you're the one who's sovereign in salvation. So please help us. To be a people that don't. Live. And behave. By what we see. But rather. We be those who live by faith. That we would be those who live in light. Of the realities of Acts 16. Please help us to do that. You know how weak. We are. How discouraged we get. So please lift our eyes. That we would trust you. And trust you. In salvation. For we ask it in his name. Amen.