

The Jailer: Prison Doors Bend to Jesus

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[0 : 00] He'll be delighted to fill you in. We're going to turn now to our Bibles for our reading this evening. And we're in the New Testament in the book of Acts. If you don't have a Bible with you, there's some at the sides there, some at the front.

Do go and grab one and turn up Acts chapter 16. And Paul's going to be preaching this evening from this passage to encourage us in the wonderful work that the Lord does in saving people, bringing them to Himself even in the most extraordinary and difficult circumstances.

So we're going to be looking particularly at the story at the end of Acts chapter 16 from verse 25, but I'm going to read in from verse 11 to set the scene. Paul is journeying around the ancient world, the Mediterranean coast, and his missionary journeys.

And you'll see at verse 11, they set sail from Troas. They made a direct voyage to Samothrass and on the following day to Neapolis. And from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.

We remained in this city some days. And on the Sabbath day, we went outside the gate on the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer. And we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshipper of God.

[1 : 29] The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized and her household as well, she urged us, saying, If you judge me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.

And she prevailed upon us. 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.

She followed Paul and us, crying out, These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation. And this she kept doing for many days.

Paul, having become greatly troubled, turned and said to the spirit, I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And it came out of her that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was come out, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. When they brought them to the magistrates, they said, These men are Jews and they're disturbing our city.

[2 : 35] They advocate customs that are not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice. The crowd joined in, attacking them. And the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods.

And when they'd inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

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. When the jailer awoke 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 out with a loud voice, Don't harm yourself. We're all here. And the jailer called for lights and rushed in. And trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas.

[3 : 40] 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'll be saved in your household.

And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and 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.

And 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.

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've 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.

[4 : 49] 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 they 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 then departed. Amen. May God bless to us his word. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, good evening, folks.

Please do have Acts 16 open in front of you. And we're considering this last section from verse 25 through to the end of the chapter.

Now, the book of Acts is the record of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus empowering his gospel to go to the very ends of the earth through his gospel witnesses.

[5 : 58] That is what you see right the way through from the beginning through to the end. The gospel begins in Jerusalem and spreads out from there through Samaria to the very ends of the earth.

The risen Lord Jesus bringing his gospel through his witnesses to the ends of the earth. It's a thrilling book to read. It's greatly encouraging.

And Acts 16 is a massive step forward in the progress of the gospel. We see the growth of the gospel into, for the first time, mainland Europe.

And in this chapter, we have three portraits of salvation. A businesswoman, a slave girl, and a prison guard. And it's a remarkable story from every angle.

This last one focuses on the prison guard. It's a remarkable story. Paul and Silas are at the receiving end of a total injustice. They end up in prison when they shouldn't have been.

[6 : 57] They find themselves in the maximum security wing. And there they are, singing away in the middle of the night, full of joy. It's remarkable. But we also see a hardened prison guard, probably ex-military.

He's brought to his knees. He comes to a saving knowledge of the risen Lord Jesus. He and his whole household. There's an earthquake which strikes in the middle of the night.

And bursts open the jail, which leads to the most anticlimactic jailbreak you'll ever see. But nobody escapes. Nobody leaves. It's a remarkable chapter.

You flip back a few paragraphs, just before the bit Willie read. And Paul and his mission team are hitting roadblock after roadblock in Asia, what we now call Turkey.

What else is going on? Frustrated at every turn. And against all their expectations and plans, they find themselves in mainland Europe, in the town of Philippi.

[7 : 59] And in a history-transforming couple of days, in Philippi, you see the foundation of the very first church in Europe.

And it comprises, as we've seen, a very surprising group of individuals from across the social spectrum. It begins with Lydia, the wealthy businesswoman.

You have a slave girl in the middle of the chapter. And then a prison guard. And the path to bring all these individuals to a saving knowledge is not a straight one.

And it's not one that you or I would choose, I don't think. I'm not sure we'd opt for the jail option. And yet that is the way the Lord works. We see demon possessions.

A miscarriage of justice. A stint in the prison. But through all of it, through all these events, God was at work. And through his mysterious ways, he was bringing to fruition and performing his great wonders.

[9 : 01] He was bringing people into his eternal kingdom through what to us seemed like very strange routes. And this chapter ought to give you and I great confidence in the great gospel

mission that Jesus called us to.

Great confidence that we see the way in which the Lord works and how he brings people into his eternal kingdom. We see in this chapter, especially in our section from verse 25, that God can use extraordinary events to do that.

He can work in astonishing ways to bring people into his kingdom. But God also works in the very ordinary, mundane looking things.

The conversion of Lydia is very normal looking. She's been exposed to Bible teaching perhaps for a long time. And she sits down with Paul.

She listens to what he says. And she responds in repentance and faith. She's baptized. But even that took a remarkable working of the Lord, didn't it?

[10:07] Just notice, end of verse 14, the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. Even the most normal looking conversion is miraculous and supernatural.

It took the Lord to work in her heart and bring her to faith. But in all these events through this chapter, it is clear that Jesus is building his church.

He is the one who brings people to salvation. And that should thrill our hearts because God has not changed. He is at work in this city. He is bringing people to know him today across all the world.

He is building his church. And we ought to be greatly encouraged. Because there are thousands of people in our city who are dead in sin and destined for eternity in hell.

Not praising God in the new creation. And so our priority must be, mustn't it, as a church, as Christians, our priority must be to join Jesus in his work of salvation.

[11:16] Seeking to reach as many people as we can. That's our great task as a church, isn't it? To make and grow disciples of Jesus. So this chapter will encourage us.

And the great comfort from these three portraits of salvation in chapter 16 is that God is sovereign in salvation. It's his work. And he is at work bringing all sorts of people to salvation.

And he will use us in that project. It may look very confusing at times. It may perplex us as to the way in which God is at work.

It may be very painful for us at times. But the law is in control. That's what we see in this chapter.

He can and may move people across continents. And even place them in prison for the advance of the gospel.

So then we're going to look at this last section of the chapter from verse 25. And we will look at it from two perspectives. The first is from the perspective of the Philippian jailer.

[12:23] And then secondly, from the perspective of Paul and Silas. So first, we're going to consider this from the perspective of the Philippian jailer. And we see that in a desperate crisis, God's enemies can come to him.

It's a very dramatic and swift conversion for the Philippian jailer. Quite the contrast to Lydia, who at the start of the chapter, who has for some time been in and around maybe the synagogue.

She's heard the scriptures taught. That was a long process, perhaps. But this jailer, he's turned around in one night. In one night, his life flips around.

And he's brought to know the Lord Jesus Christ. Who knows how much he's heard before this night.

Perhaps he's heard about these new people in town. He's heard about Paul and Silas arriving.

He's maybe heard about the slave girl in the previous section. But he certainly heard more when they were brought before the magistrates. And it was his job as the prison guard to then take them and bring them into the prison.

[13:30] He's maybe heard a bit about their story on the way. At the very least, he's probably heard some of their singing. Their psalm singing in the prison there. But regardless of what he heard, the Lord brought this jailer to the very edge of himself.

He placed him in the darkest moment of his life. Did you notice that he was preparing to end it?

When the prison doors were open, he thought everyone had escaped.

He took his sword out. He was about to end his own life. It doesn't get more desperate or dark than that. But it was in that moment, that moment of utter desperation, of desperate crisis, that salvation was sought.

So how was it that this tough prison guard, this probably a former soldier, was brought to his knees to utter the words of verse 30?

Notice what he says there. What must I do to be saved? What must I do to be saved? How did that happen? How did he get to that point? Well, things started out, I'm sure, like a fairly regular evening

down at the Macedonian Central Correction Facility.

[14:52] He secured and transferred the latest batch of prisoners. He's been there at the magistrate's court. He's brought his new prisoners down to the prison. And there's two out-of-towners there. He's not seen them before, Paul and Silas, two Jews.

And he's brought them into the high security wing, the inner prison. He's fastened them in the stocks. So far, so normal for the prison guard that night.

A normal evening. But then things started to get a bit strange. They're singing and praying, coming from the inner sanctum of the high security unit.

What is going on? He maybe thought. Why are they singing? Why are they worshipping their God? What can they possibly have to sing about? Well, he drifts over to sleep, it seems.

Maybe he thought there were lullabies, and he slips over. But he's woken up with an absolute shock. The ground literally shakes beneath him.

[15:56] Verse 26. Suddenly there was a great earthquake. So the foundations of the prison were shaken. He's shaken from his sleep.

And once he's recovered from the initial shock, his first thought is to go and see what's going on. Is the prison secure? He wants to check for damage, to make sure the integrity of the prison hasn't been compromised.

And imagine his horror when he sees the prison doors bust open. That is the last thing you want to see when you are the one in charge of a prison.

All those less than savory characters you've had under lock and key for maybe years are suddenly free. And as the prison guard, you're probably not their most favorite person.

But not only was his job on the line, his very life was on the line here. That is why he reached for a sword in verse 27.

[16:58] See what it says? When he woke and saw the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. He knows the game is up.

He knows his future is totally shattered and that he faces the death sentence. That was the consequence. If your prisoners escaped, that was it. Inexcusable.

Punishable by death. And in the blink of an eye, he's come face to face with his own mortality, hasn't he? Death is suddenly right in front of him.

What an unimaginably terrible moment for him. This man needed, as every person on this planet needs, to know the God who made him and to know the forgiveness of sin that was certainly his greatest need.

He needed salvation. And here he was, face to face with the end. And there was no better way of making him realize his need of that than by the Lord bringing this earthquake.

[18:08] That would make him feel more than anything else. His insecurity in this life, his immediate need to be brought, absolutely made right with the God who was in control.

He was brought to the end of himself. He was face to face with his end. Reality and eternity suddenly became very obvious to this individual.

He was facing up to eternal matters. And a world he perhaps ignored up to that point. He hadn't really thought about death.

It was suddenly right there. It was in front of him. Listen to how one preacher draws out the implications of what happens here. 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 fundamental basics. Eternity is not a state of existence beyond this earthly life, somehow far off and shadowy.

[19:19] But rather it's something right there at our side, touching us at every point. All that separates us from eternity is a thin partition of time.

So thin that we might sometimes think we can hear the whispers from the other side. Eternity is never very far away, is it? And in this instance, the jailer hears those whispers become suddenly a voice of thunder.

It unnerved him and unsettled him. This stern, callous jailer is suddenly face to face with reality. And how quickly and unexpectedly God can sometimes reduce people from indifference to terror. maybe indifferent is exactly how you feel at this very moment.

Well, be careful. God may need to shake you. He had to get the attention of this jailer somehow and this is the way he had to do it. God may need to shake you and startle you, wake you up from your indifference.

[20 : 34] Perhaps we do need to face up with our own mortality because it's not very far away, is it? And it's far better that we humble ourselves before the Lord than him doing the humbling as he did with this jailer.

Because he can turn even hardened prison guards like this. He can turn to jail in a minute. But the great and wonderful thing is that the God who can do that, the God who can literally shake the foundations of a prison and bring a tough man down to a trembling wreck, that God is also very gentle and gracious and kind.

He did this. The Lord did this. He brought this man to this point so that he would know salvation. And before the Jedi could fall on his sword, he hears one of the prisoners call from inside the prison.

Don't harm yourself. We're all here. You can imagine the relief he would have experienced. He's got the sword there. He's about to fall on it.

And he hears the prisoners are still there. They've not walked away. You can imagine him thinking, I'm delivered from judgment here.

[21 : 55] That death penalty which is hanging over me, that's gone. The prisoners are here. I'm safe. But something of even greater significance than his immediate life is occupying his mind.

It's interesting his response. Once he's heard the prisoners are safe, he's maybe been brought face to face with greater realities. And so he rushes in to see these men in the prison and he comes trembling before Paul.

And he asks there in verse 30, what must I do to be saved? And his question must be, mustn't it, more than simply salvation from the physical death he feared when he thought all the prisoners had escaped because that threat has now passed.

The prisoners are all still there. His bosses are not going to kill him for that. They're all there. But I think he must be asking a deeper question.

What must I do to be saved? He's no doubt heard something of what these men have been up to in Philippi. He's heard about the events in the previous section about the exorcism of the slave girl.

[23 : 07] He's heard their words, their singing, their praying. He's maybe not seen or heard much, but he's heard enough, hasn't he, to be able to ask this question of Paul. He's heard enough.

He's experienced the earth shaking beneath his feet, the extraordinary non-escape of these prisoners. Something's going on. He's now been made aware that there is a higher power to whom he needs to seek salvation from.

The real and living God has suddenly broken in upon him and he knows that he must face him. And so he asked, what must I do to be saved?

And the Lord will sometimes do that in our lives and in the lives of those we love and care for. You realize that God is real. You realize he is your creator.

You realize you owe him everything. You realize that you are a sinner and you need salvation.

What must I do to be saved? Perhaps that's your experience at this very moment.

[24 : 17] Maybe you're asking, what must I do to be saved? Things have happened in your life in recent days and weeks. And the real God, the God of Scripture, has invaded your life.

All your preconceived notions have crumbled away. Now maybe you're feeling broken, trembling before him. Well, don't waste that humbling.

Turn to him. Turn to him for salvation. That is your only hope. That is the only hope this jailer realizes. He says to Paul, what must I do to be saved? And Paul answers him, verse 31.

He says, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your households. What wonderful news that was to him.

There was a way for salvation. He could be saved. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household. It wasn't just good news for him, was it? But for all those he loved, his whole household.

[25 : 26] And so Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to him verse 32 and to all those who were in his household. And right there and then there was total transformation as this man comes to saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And just look at what he does there. Verse 33. He took them at that same hour of the night and washed their wounds. And he was baptized at once.

He and his whole family. The man who had taken these men and thrown them into the prison, shackled them in stocks, he now takes them home.

He tends to their bleeding backs and feeds them. He and his household are baptized. It's an extraordinary story. What a turner out. An evening that started out as a normal one for that jailer turned on its head totally.

He's looking disaster in the face. He's looking at the end. He's contemplating his own death. And he comes face to face with the living God seeking salvation and finding it. And it's an evening that ends with rejoicing.

[26 : 39] Verse 34. He brought them up into his house, set food before them and he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

Isn't that a remarkable story? What a turnaround. The Lord can do that. The second Christian household in Europe. What a wonderful joy for the jailer.

A wonderful joy for Paul and Silas. It was quite uneven for them, don't you think? What seemed like defeat, ending up in the prison, it turned 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 because their imprisonment was the means of the jailer's conversion.

So we're going to look at it now from Paul and Silas' perspective. We've seen it from the jailer's perspective, a pretty remarkable turnaround for him, but it was a pretty remarkable night for Paul and Silas too.

[27 : 45] And we see with their story that even in great darkness of suffering, God's servants can sing salvation of him. It was a day that began with Paul and Silas casting out demons.

We saw that in that middle section from verse 16. They were dealing with this young slave girl who was demon possessed. That was how the day began, it ended with them being thrown in prison.

And to most onlookers, I'm sure the rest of the small mission team that had travelled with Paul to Philippi, I would imagine they thought this was a pretty spectacular failure.

This was not the plan. But as Luke, the writer, is making clear, far from being a disaster, this whole event was orchestrated by God in order to bring this jailer to saving faith.

Without Paul and Silas being thrust into the depths of the prison and the extraordinary events that unfolded there, the jailer would continue to walk in darkness, wouldn't he? He would never have had reason to consider eternity.

[28 : 57] He would never have thought about his need for salvation, had these events not taken place. This was the best way for this jailer to hear the gospel. And for that to happen, God's gospel servants had to be brought to this place of dark and suffering.

They had to be at the right place at the right time to speak the good news of the gospel to this man. It took a miscarriage of justice, bleeding backs, feet in the stocks.

Couldn't there have been another way, surely? Couldn't they have met for a coffee in the local cafe, Paul and the jailer? Couldn't there not have been a better way? Well, in God's wisdom, there wasn't.

This was the way. Very puzzling for us. Very puzzling, I'm sure, for Paul and Silas. God, if we struggle to grasp this story and why God would do it that way, if we struggle with this story, then we're going to struggle with a far bigger story, a story of infinitely greater miscarriages of justice and beatings and darkness.

If we struggle with this story, then we're going to struggle with the very heart of the gospel itself. Because the gospel claims that the creator of the universe, the one who cast a billion stars into space, the one who created this planet we live on, who gives us all that we need for existence, the one who created each one of us and sustained us at this very moment, the one who did all that, handed over his son by his purpose and foreknowledge into the hands of sinful men to suffer an unjust trial, abuse, physical violence, and finally the agonies of crucifixion.

[30 : 54] And he did all this for you and for me. Amongst all the billions of galaxies out there, he came and did it personally for us, for the Philippian jailer, he did it for me, for you.

And that is surely the most difficult thing in all the gospel to believe, isn't it, that God would do that, that it would be that way through death on the cross. It was through great suffering that God

brought salvation to you and to me.

And as his people, we are called, as we take the gospel to a lost world, we are to be prepared to share in that suffering. In fact, it may be through the very suffering we fear that the Lord will work salvation in someone's life.

And we are, the apostle Paul would encourage us to count it a privilege to share in Christ's sufferings. It was through his imprisonment there in Philippi that this jailer was to find salvation. It was in those moments of suffering for Paul in the prison that this jailer would find salvation. And Paul would later write to this church in Philippi, and I suppose the jailer would have been one of those recipients of that letter.

[32 : 23] You can read about it, Philippians. And here's what Paul says. See, Paul sees his suffering in light of the advance of the gospel.

And he encourages those in Philippi to be of the same mind, to see their own sufferings in the same light. He goes on to write later on in that letter, he says, 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, engage in the same conflict that you saw I had, and now here that I still have.

So this church in Philippi, born out of Paul's own imprisonment and suffering, years down the line he's writing to them, encouraging them, as he's in prison again, to endure in their own sufferings. And as the Philippians were to follow Paul, who in turn followed Christ, we too as Christians living today are to do likewise and follow the Philippian example. We are to follow Paul as he follows Christ and be willing to endure suffering, even to rejoice in it.

because through our sufferings, Jesus can and will advance his gospel. He will bring about his great purposes for his great church building project.

[34 : 09] And that is what we're about, seeking to make and grow disciples of Jesus. And God may, he may in his sovereignty, bring us to places of great darkness in order to bring about his word of salvation, maybe just to one individual.

Folk that we would never otherwise have reached if it wasn't for our own personal darkness. It may not be the maximum security prison, but our own moments of hard suffering he may use.

Illness, bereavement, unemployment, relational hardships, whatever it may be, the Lord is sovereign. And it's our great privilege to serve him, no matter where he might lead us.

And we can trust him, even rejoice in him in those moments. There is Paul and Silas singing in the midst of this jail. Their feet are in the stocks, their backs are bleeding.

They are rejoicing. Pain in this world, for a time, is sometimes often the route to eternal joy.

[35 : 28] And Paul's pain here led to great joy for that jailer, didn't it? Eternal joy for the jailer and his family. The risen and ascended Lord Jesus, he reigns.

He's sovereign. He is sovereign in salvation. And that's what you see through the book of Acts. And here in chapter 16 of it, he's sovereign in salvation. He is drawing people into his kingdom all the time.

And he's sovereign in that role. He can use amazing things. Prisons and earthquakes. He is sovereign over people's hearts.

He is sovereign over the powers of darkness. He's sovereign over prison doors. It's his mission work. He is powerful to save. And he can do that with people that we would write off.

I think if you and I are in Philippi, we would not have the Philippian jailer as convert number three. But the Lord did. And people we would write off, he can transform.

[36 : 34] And he calls us, each one of us, to join with him in that work. Each of us is part of that growing mission team. We are going to the ends of the earth, proclaiming his gospel message, calling people to repent and believe.

And we've all got a role to play. And so we should pray that the God who is sovereign in salvation would be at work in the lives and hearts of those that we know and love.

Even the most unlikely, the people we would write off, pray to the God of salvation. And we have great joy in doing that together. We're not alone.

We bring people along. We bring to church. Bring them to the life course. Bring them to hear God's word being taught. And he can work in their hearts because it's him.

It's the Lord. As with Lydia, who opens hearts to pay attention to what's being said and will enable people to respond in repentance and faith. He is the one who does that.

[37 : 40] And we can trust him to do it. We can trust him to work through his word. The risen and ascended Lord Jesus reigns. He is sovereign.

He is sovereign in salvation. And he will build his church. Just as he promised. So we can trust him. And have great joy.

In the midst of even darkened suffering. We can have great joy in seeing people coming to know the Lord Jesus like this jailer. So let's pray to him now, shall we, and ask him to be at work in our city.

Father, we thank you that you are a good and a gracious God. Lord, you are more gracious than we are. You are far more powerful than we dare to imagine.

And so we ask for our city, for the individuals who live within it, that you would draw many into your eternal kingdom.

[38 : 52] And Lord, you will baffle us and surprise us with the means by which you do that. Lord, help us to be willing servants. Help us to be those who gladly proclaim your gospel and hold out the word of everlasting life.

So help us as a church to do that. Give us great courage and encourage us in that task that we would see many coming to eternal life in your name.

Help us to be faithful in that task. In Jesus' name. Amen.