

## SET THE PRISONERS FREE

Acts 16:16-34

First Presbyterian Church of Georgetown, Texas

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### Acts 16:16-34

<sup>16</sup>One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. <sup>17</sup>While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." <sup>18</sup>She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. <sup>19</sup>But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. <sup>20</sup>When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews <sup>21</sup>and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." <sup>22</sup>The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup>After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. <sup>24</sup>Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

<sup>25</sup>About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup>Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. <sup>27</sup>When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup>But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." <sup>29</sup>The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup>Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup>They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup>They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup>At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. <sup>34</sup>He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

We Americans are probably best known throughout the world for our freedom. We are free to believe, speak, and worship as we desire. We are free to think and teach as we please. Freedom is a paramount issue in our world. It is what America does best.

We, of course, are celebrating Memorial Day this weekend. This has been a day, since the end of the Civil War, to remember the sacrifices of those who have died in our armed forces. Originally called Decoration Day, it has been a time to visit cemeteries and memorials, decorate graves, and pay our respects. It has been a time to give thanks for those who have given so much so that we might have freedom. It is what America has done so very well.

This doesn't mean we're perfect. A careful reading of American history will show that many groups have struggled and continue to struggle for the freedom that we all claim to have in the U.S. Still, even though we are less than perfect, we are to be commended. Our country has enabled more groups to experience freedom than any other.

The American experiment has done something bold and unique in the religious world. We have enabled various branches of the church and other religions to co-exist in America, for the most part peacefully. When you consider other regions of the world, you realize how special and unique this religious freedom and tolerance is.

The Bible speaks of freedom a great deal, although the message there is deeper than simple political or even religious freedom. Two verses in the gospels stand out in my mind. In John 8:36, Jesus says *"If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."* The crowd's response to that statement is interesting: *"who says we're not free. What gives you the right, Jesus, to say who's free and who's not? Do you know who you're talking to? We are Abraham's descendants. We stand for freedom."*

They didn't understand that although free in one sense, that in another sense, they could be enslaved. Jesus' message is that even though you may be free outwardly, you may still be a slave inwardly. The freedom that Jesus promises is of a different order.

Some are imprisoned by a meaningless life. Others by a guilt that haunts them. Some are imprisoned by a fear of death. Others by a hunger for prestige. We can be imprisoned by our anger and by our depression. By the busyness of our lives or life's circumstances. By our addictions to alcohol or food. Even by our religion or faith. All of these things can box us in, imprison us, inhibiting our freedom.

Jesus says: *"If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."* The other saying that comes to mind occurs when Jesus is the designated reader at a synagogue service in Nazareth. He chooses as his text Isaiah 61:1-2 which is descriptive of his ministry.

You remember how it goes: *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"* (Luke 4:18-19 NIV).

Jesus saw his mission in part to set the prisoners free. I can't recall any literal prisoners that Jesus set free. But that was his mission. Jesus' ministry of preaching, healing, and working miracles were intended to free people. To free people from their sicknesses, legalisms, sins, and blindnesses. To truly set the prisoners free.

After Jesus was raised and ascended, God continued to set people free. This is what our story in Acts 16 is all about- setting the prisoners free. It takes place in a lengthy section in Acts on Paul's ministry in Philippi (16:12-40).

There was no synagogue in the city and so religious people gathered by the river where prayers were said daily. One person who listened to Paul's message was a wealthy merchant woman, Lydia. She received the message and was baptized. To our knowledge, she is the first Christian convert in Europe.

In our text this morning, we find Paul and Silas heading down to the same river to pray when they encounter a young slave girl who could predict the future. Her owners milked that unique skill for all they could. They set up a booth and charged by the prediction. She raked in a lot of money for them. In a sense, these owners were imprisoned by their greed. They were held captive by the profit they made off the fortune-telling.

This young girl was obviously very troubled, the demonic had captured her life. She began to follow Paul, Silas, and Luke chanting hour after hour "*these are slaves of the most high God*", "*these are slaves of the most high God*", "*these are slaves...*". Well, you get the idea. The statement was true but it was also very annoying. Verse 18 says this went on for days.

Paul, as Luke tells us, was "*very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And it came out of her that very hour.'*" This incident reminds us of similar incidents in the ministry of Jesus. This young girl had been imprisoned by the demonic spirit. Now she was free.

An interesting thing happens here that continues to happen today- not everybody is happy when people are set free. There always seems to be people who are grumpy about people getting freedom. "*When her owners*", Luke continues to narrate, "*saw that their money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities.*"

Not only had the demonic spirit left but their source of profit had left too. I like the way commentator F.F. Bruce puts it: "when Paul exorcised the spirit that possessed her, he exorcised their source of income as well."

It didn't matter that a person had been set free, this freedom jeopardized their economic well-being. Their wallets had been threatened and so they responded with violence. The owners brought Paul and company before the magistrate with silly charges. The magistrate responded by stripping them of their clothes and severely beating them. This is doubtless one of the three beatings Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 11:25. The beating should not have been imposed on a Roman citizen but at this point the authorities are ignorant of Paul's status. The magistrates simply assumed the apostles' guilt.

The jailer is told to keep the prisoners secure. So they are thrown "*in the innermost cell and their feet are fastened in the stocks.*" Paul and Silas did not sleep well that night, thanks to their wounds and their uncomfortable position in the jail cell. It had not been a good day. At least according to the outward circumstances.

Many of us, and its the most human thing in the whole world to do, are imprisoned by the circumstances of our lives. If things are going well, then we're doing well. If circumstances are not going well, then we don't do well. What is radical about the Christian faith is that there are times we can do well when the circumstances of our lives are going poorly. God can give us peace even though our lives are anything but peaceful.

This story in Acts is one of the most concrete depictions of joy in the midst of suffering that you will find in the Bible. This is yet another example of God setting people free- God delivered Paul and Silas from being bound by the circumstances of their lives.

The jailer was expecting a quiet night. He was responsible for the prisoners. In fact, it is likely that he would lose his own life if the prisoners somehow escaped. But there was nothing to worry about- the prison was secure. So he began to nap.

Down the hall there's a noise. Not the usual noise. Not the usual moans and groans. But singing. They were slightly off-key but it was a pleasant sound. They were singing hymns. What sort of people were these? People set free, of course.

Then the walls jerked and the floor began to feel like waves in the sea. The jail rattled. Earthquake!

Having been in a few earthquakes, I think the jailer's reactions are quite common. He was terrified, not thinking, heart pounding, thoroughly dazed. Dust filled the air. All he could think of was that the prisoners were loose and he would die for failing to fulfill his responsibilities. In despair, he pulls his sword and is ready to plunge it into his chest.

The apostle Paul calms him. "Don't do it! Do not harm yourself. We're just in here singing." The jailer responds: "*What must I do to be saved?*" How can I manage this crisis? Paul responds with the classic statement: "*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.*"

It is conceivable that the apostle Paul might respond to us in a similar way. What do I do in a crisis, with my grief, with my medical results next week, with my child who is difficult to live with, or my parent who I don't understand? What do I do? Believe and trust.

There is more to say, of course. So much more to know about grief, about crises, about relationships. The first step is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, to trust him with your whole life, and you will ultimately be saved.

This is the most basic Christian confession. In the early church, someone was a Christian when they could say "Jesus is Lord." Not the emperor, or the Roman state, or a Greek deity, or even themselves. None of them are Lord. Jesus is Lord. This confession of faith continues today.

“One becomes an active member of the church”, our constitution says, “through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and acceptance of his Lordship in all of life” (G-5.0100).

One is set free spiritually when one makes that confession of faith. The jailer is set free spiritually when he and his household believe. The jailer washes Paul and Silas’ wounds in gratitude. The whole household is baptized. Perhaps the baptisms took place in a well or fountain in the prison courtyard. Or perhaps, as at least one commentator thinks, the water came from the same simple bowl that brought cleansing and healing to Paul and Silas’ wounds.

Who in this story is really the prisoner? And who is free? It is not as obvious as it looks. For those who are imprisoned, the apostles, are the ones who are truly free. While those who are the keepers of the prisoners are really imprisoned.

God set people free through the ministry of Jesus. God continued to set prisoners free in the early church. God continues to set people free today.

I believe that God sets people free through a variety of means today. Let me mention these means briefly in closing.

God sets people free through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the scriptures. When we realize that God truly loves us and has a mission for our lives, we are freed from lack of meaning and we are freed to serve. God is able to give us peace and strength to face the problems that life presents us with.

God also sets people free through the ministry of mental health professionals. In my ministry as a pastor, I know that counselors, social workers, and psychiatrists are often gifts from God. If someone is struggling with depression or anxiety or post-traumatic stress, these professionals are given by God to help set us free emotionally.

God sets us free through the ministry of medical professionals. Nurses, doctors, pharmacists, hospitals are all given by God to help us with our physical struggles. Not everyone is healed, of course, but so many are physically set free through their important work.

In our time, God is setting people free through the ministry of support groups. These groups provide freedom for many. For the family members of an alcoholic, for eating disorders, for those struggling through grief, for all forms of addiction.

When you think of God setting people free, you may not immediately think of these means. But from my perspective as a pastor, these are all means that God is using to set the prisoners free in our day.

Being saved, as with the jailer, often begins at a point in the past. But being saved also continues throughout the Christian life. We continue the process of sanctification where we come to more fully comprehend, live, and grow in the Christian life. A story like this one should give us pause and cause us to reflect.

In what ways do we need to be set free today? Have we availed ourselves of the means that God has given to set us free? What is yet to be saved in my perception and behavior? What parts of our lives need the gracious intervention of God? Jesus came to set us free, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners.

Have we called upon him to help us, to care for us, to set us free?

### PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We seek to honor you, Lord Jesus, and live out your life in this congregation. We do not always live up to your calling for us but do admit today that we want to be your people. Enable us, by your grace, to be devoted to your revelation to us in the scriptures. Strengthen us, to be fully devoted to this fellowship- caring, supporting, and encouraging one another. Remind us to communicate with you, to intercede for each other and the church worldwide, to give thanks for the tangible expressions of your care that you give to us week after week.

We pray for those among us who have needs. We pray for those in the hospital and those recovering from surgery- continue the healing you have begun in their bodies. We pray for all those in recent times who have lost a dear one- touch these this week with your sustaining comfort and peace. We pray for those among us who have a family member who struggles with an addiction- give these families guidance and patience. We pray for those who are confused and anxious about the days to come- bless them with your calm and your compassion.

We are grateful, Dear God, for your church. There have been times when we have been touched by another here, times when we have gained a richer understanding of you and your purpose in the world, times when we have been lifted above our concerns to serve someone else. We give you thanks for this church and your church around the world. Bless us now, with your presence, your wisdom, and your vision.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus Christ, who is Head of the Church. Amen.