

Acts 16:16-34 New Revised Standard Version

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. 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." 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. 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. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell 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. 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. 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. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 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.

What must I do to be saved? Last summer we went to Schlitterbahn and it was amazing! I remembered going there with our church youth group when I was in high school and one of my friends saw a sign. The sign said, "Deep water at end of ride, you have gone too far to exit, ask lifeguard for assistance." Years later, that same friend was in the French Riviera and the entrance to the hotel swimming pool had a sign that said: "Swimming is forbidden in the absence of a Savior." What must we do to be saved? Well, I guess it depends on what we want to be saved from.

Our story has a lot to say about being saved. We meet a slave girl whose owners make money from her fortune-telling. She calls Paul and Silas slaves of the Most High God because she knows slavery well. More out of annoyance than compassion, Paul frees her of the spirit of divination, and finds himself immediately in trouble with her owners because they are slaves to their own financial greed. Paul never speaks to the girl. He addresses the spirit instead of her. He doesn't seem to be motivated by a desire to heal her or help her. He just wants her to be quiet. He doesn't have any outrage that she is a slave. Paul frees her from her possession, but he does nothing to free her from being a possession.<sup>1</sup> We hear nothing of how this changes the life of this slave girl. She disappears from our story.

Paul and Silas are dragged to the authorities, but the slave owners don't tell the magistrates the crime is the loss of the value of the slave. The slave owners say that Paul and Silas are political subversives. They are undermining Roman order with Jewish customs. They are challenging unjust economic systems, and the slave owners say these Jews are guilty of political offenses. They are accused of being the most dangerous of criminals because they are threatening the natural order of things. They are not from around here. They are Jews. They are

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<sup>1</sup> Cole-Turner, Ronald. Theological Perspective in Feasting on the Word Year C, Volume 2. P. 522.

turning over the oppressive order of the day. The slave owners are playing to the racism of the magistrates.

Paul and Silas are attacked by the crowd, stripped, beaten and thrown into prison. But, at midnight they are still praying and singing hymns to God while the other prisoners listen. Their bodies are in chains but their spirits are free to worship. Then, suddenly, an earthquake frees them from their chains. The jailer would rather die than face what the authorities will do if he loses these prisoners. Paul and Silas assure him that they are still there, and the jailer does what he was afraid the earthquake had done. He frees them from prison and brings them to his own home. He saves Paul and Silas and then he becomes a follower of Jesus himself.

The jailer asks, “What must I do to be saved?” Today, we don’t know what he meant. Saved from what? Was he looking for protection from the authorities who might hold him accountable? Did he see Paul and Silas as divine men with great power who might grant him some gift? We don’t know exactly what he meant by the question but we can understand. We understand because we all have experienced times when life seems to spin out of control. What must I do to be saved from what destroys me? What must I do to be saved from bondage, from my addiction, from emptiness, from boredom, from apathy? We sometimes feel as if we have lost our way in the world. What must I do to be saved? For the jailer it was an immediate concern, but for us we are often better at hiding. When we are in trouble, or our lives are falling apart, we can be pretty good at pretending everything is fine. When we are losing our way, we keep it to ourselves. We keep drinking or we stay in an abusive relationship because we are afraid to change.

For the jailer, the answer is clear, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” For us, that answer might seem inadequate. We want a strategic plan or a tested method of self-improvement. Paul’s answer seems so passive. Trust that Jesus is saving you. How can that be enough? And how can one answer work for every problem? Maybe the solution isn’t self-improvement or a strategic plan. I love to make lists. One summer I made a list of all of the ice cream places that I had not been to and I visited them all. It didn’t make me happy, it did make me heavier. Being saved isn’t about bucket lists or doing new things to try to make ourselves happy. Being saved is about God reaching out to us in Jesus, and transforming our lives. I was listening to Kate Bowler’s *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved* podcast and she said her experience with being diagnosed with stage 4 cancer as a young mother taught her that “God gives minimum protection and maximum support.”<sup>2</sup> I believe that God does not make bad things happen to us. God helps us through the bad things, whatever they might be.

Opening our heart to God means that we stop trying to save ourselves. But that doesn’t let us off the hook. We still have problems, and there are still problems to be solved in the world. We have much to do to bring release to captives, justice for the oppressed, and peace for those ravaged by conflict.<sup>3</sup> But God can bring healing, wholeness, and unity to our lives and to our world. We see God’s work in the healing of a slave girl who was no longer exploited to satisfy the greed of her owners. We see it in the salvation of a jailer. The jailer who seems free but he’s bound to this system in which life can come crashing down on him with one unexpected earthquake. Power, status, wealth, and position give us the illusion of freedom, but the hidden costs are soul-crushing. The jailer feels as if his life is worthless without his position. He is chained to something that promises to give him value, but leaves him feeling bound and without peace.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://katebowler.com/how-to-grieve-well-full-transcript/>

<sup>3</sup> Cole-Turner, Ronald. *Theological Perspective in Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 2. P. 526.

What makes someone free? Having a key to lock someone up doesn't make you a free person. Being on the inside of prison bars doesn't necessarily mean you aren't free. Many of us today don't feel free. We are afraid and anxious; we feel worried and hopeless. How can we find that well of faith to draw on that leaves us feeling free, that gives us that feeling of peace and unity that Paul and Silas find when they are in physical chains but still able to pray and sing hymns to God? Paul and Silas's trust in God gives them a deep contentment. They aren't worried about the future. Paul and Silas know that they are with God in prison or out of prison. They are disciples of Jesus in prison or out of prison. There's nothing that can happen that will shake their faith. Even when they could have escaped, they didn't. Their faith is secure no matter what they experience.

What is binding you today? What has you chained? What has your soul imprisoned? What are you so reliant on that if it came crashing down you'd think your life was no longer of value? Today may we know who we are, who we serve, and who loves us. May we be reminded that life can grow from the ashes. May we know that freedom in Christ is release from those things that do not bring peace, do not bring healing, and do not bring life. Freedom in Christ is hope. Belief doesn't mean that we won't struggle. Things will not immediately start going our way. What must we do to be saved? Realize that even in the farthest corner of whatever prison cell we find ourselves, God is with us. We are not alone. When everything has crumbled behind us and we can't see beyond our despair, God calls to us offering new life. God's transforming power can work through the community of faith to bring healing and hope, even for you, even for me. Christ invites us to experience freedom and that is very good news.

May we all feel the peace of Paul and Silas, the peace that keeps us singing, that keeps us feeling secure and loved. No matter what news we see on TV, no matter what happens in our lives. "Because he lives, I can face tomorrow; because he lives, all fear is gone; because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living just because he lives." Amen.