

My Chains Fell Off

Text: Acts 16:16-40

It was certainly an interesting day: a little occult, an exorcism, some political intrigue, an earthquake, and in the end the wonderful joy of the gospel!

As Luke narrates it for us in Acts 16, Paul and Silas' experiences in the city of Philippi that day contained more excitement than most of us manage to pack into a whole year.

Luke is keen to give us a picture of freedom...

Freedom from the prisons and the chains that hold us.
And this comes out in all the players in this story.

We all find ourselves in different kinds of prisons...

And there is only one who can free us from those prisons.

Sometimes we are imprisoned by others;
sometimes our own actions imprison us,
and other times circumstances that are beyond our control imprison us.

If we look closely enough at the slave girl, the magistrates, the jailor, and Paul and Silas in our reading from Acts this morning, we will perhaps see glimpses of ourselves and our need for Jesus: the only one who can free us.

The slave girl certainly finds herself imprisoned.

We meet her as she follows Paul and his companions yelling, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

This girl was possessed by a spirit by which she predicted the future.

Her owners realized the great value in that, so they used her as a fortune teller, ignoring or not caring about her spiritual bondage.

Not only was this girl possessed by a spirit, she finds herself used by those close to her.

If the spirit speaking through this girl is speaking the truth...what's the problem?

I mean the spirit is telling the truth...

Maybe Paul could have said...

'Look even the demons are speaking the truth'.

The problem is one of association.

The spirit proclaiming this truth wanted the people to somehow make the link between them and the preaching of Paul and Silas.

Implying they were all on the same team.

That is a real problem...linking Paul's ministry to her work of fortune telling.

Paul did not want his work validated by this evil spirit.

Paul understood the fortune telling power of this girl was supernatural.

But Paul understood that this ability was not hers...but rather from Satan himself.

Fortune telling has always been popular throughout history.

Many here this morning, myself included, have looked at and read horoscopes.
Some may have been to a physic.

Why? Why the interest? Why does God forbid it?

Why do you want to know your future in detail?

So you can know and control the future?

So you can manipulate it, so you can be the master of your own fate/destiny.

You want to take God's authority for yourself...saying you don't trust God ability.

All of us would love to know our future.

There is something about knowing your future that gives you security.

You don't have to rely on God...you can see it coming, so you don't need God.

So it flies in the face of God's authority.

Matthew 6 don't worry about tomorrow.

Its source is not from God.

God has given everything we need to know for life.

That's why fortune telling is condemned in the Bible.

Literally, going to the enemy to find out how to live.

An enemy of God; enemy of the gospel.

So Paul becomes annoyed after many days and he puts a stop to it.

We are not told why he allows it to go on for many days but eventually he has had enough.

We read that he is 'troubled'.

You get the sense he was annoyed.

But he is not annoyed in the selfish sense.

As a mum or dad, when your kids annoy you it is usually because you want your time, your space, a bit of quiet.

That is a selfish kind of annoyance.

The word used here has the idea of pain and grief, as well as anger.

Grieving at what was taking place.

He was angry, not because it was irritating him...

He was angry because of what it was doing to the young girl,

What it was doing to the crowd that followed.

What it was doing to the gospel message he was proclaiming.

Paul recognised that the girl is controlled by an evil spirit.

So he commands the spirit to come out of her in the name of Jesus Christ.

The only name, the only one who could deliver.

The spirit came out right away.

The girl is freed from her spiritual bondage.

Imagine her joy!

Imagine her understanding the truthfulness of the words she proclaimed, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

Imagine her surprise to find in Paul offered her the One who could free her from her imprisonment.

I reckon this girl became one of the early members of the church in Philippi.

I reckon that after being freed from her chains, she couldn't help but serve her new master, the one who cared for her and loved her even to his own death on the cross.

So it is that Jesus Christ frees us from spiritual bondage inviting us to a life of service in his name.

These girl's owners had a tidy little business going.

But in V15 we are introduced to the economic problem they faced.

Luke uses a play on words in the Greek here...almost a touch of humour.

The same phrase for the demon leaving the girl is used of the income leaving the owners.

Because of this they became furious and dragged Paul & Silas before the magistrates.

They were the chief rulers in the Roman colony.

Often ruled their cases in the public forum.

The magistrates in this account find themselves trapped in their own prison of fear.

These magistrates are charged with keeping order and peace in the city of Philippi.

Paul and Silas were accused of throwing the city into an uproar and advocating customs that were unlawful for Romans.

Notice that no one mentions to the magistrates how Paul, in the name of Christ, freed the slave girl from the spirit that had held her in bondage.

Paul and Silas face a crowd that falsely accuses them and ignores the truth all the while growing more and more agitated and the magistrates need to do something.

Instead of seeking the truth, the magistrates give in to the crowd.
Instead of standing up to injustice they subject Paul and Silas to a public beating.

While these magistrates are deathly afraid of the crowd, they're also afraid of Paul and Silas when they find out that these two men are Roman citizens.

It is against the law to beat and imprison a Roman citizen without giving that person a trial.

These magistrates hurry to the prison and escort Paul and Silas out of it, seeking to make amends for their actions.

Ultimately their fear leads them to disregard the gospel preached, because they ask them to leave Philippi.

Instead of seeking freedom, they are found seeking a false sense of stability, security and peace.

After the beating they are handed over to the prison warden/jailer.

His job was to make sure that prisoners did not get away.
When Paul and Silas are dragged into his presence, he isn't charged with making them comfortable or tending to their wounds.

He is expected to lock them up for the night and he does this without mercy.

Here they are, beaten and bruised; in a damp prison cell;

 Locked securely in stocks.

Their reaction is amazing...

 Praying and singing hymns to God.

Contrast that with us...we want everything just right when we worship God.

 Not too hot, or cold.

 Padded chairs, clear PA, lighting right and so the list goes on.

Here are these guys praising God in the difficult times.

Here they are in some of the worst imaginable conditions...

 As a result of being accused of something they didn't do...

 And they still managed to sing hymns of praise to God!

Tertullian, a church father once said, 'The legs feel nothing in the stocks, when one's heart is in heaven.'

James 1:2-4

As believers we can rejoice in the midst of trials.

We don't have to like them.

We don't have to say, 'Give me more.'

But we rejoice in the midst of them because we know they are temporal.

What's the worst that can happen?

We could die and go to heaven.

It is also beneficial.

The way it is beneficial comes out in the verses that follow.

There was a greater purpose in their suffering.

End of verse 25...the prisoners were listening to them.

They give glory to God and to Jesus in so striking a fashion it appears to have shut down the conversation throughout the whole prison.

All the other prisoners were listening, not talking; listening, not swearing; listening, not telling dirty jokes.

In a place of bitterness and cursing

there are 2 guys singing hymns and praising God.

Here were men in prison, with no hope...probably ready to die in prison...

And there were voices of praise.

The jailor drifted into sleep on that night trusting that his prisoners were well secured and that there would be no problems.

Suddenly God intervenes; there was an earthquake that shakes loose the bars that held the doors of the prison and to free the prisoners' chains from the walls.

This was not a good situation for the jailor.

He knew that his life would be demanded in payment for the lives of his escaped prisoners.

Seeing that the doors of the prison were open, the jailor drew his sword and was ready to end his life.

One thing stopped him; Paul called out to him saying, "Don't harm yourself, for we are all here."

Has that ever struck you as amazing?

We assume that God brought the earthquake so that Paul & Silas could go free.

We assume that God is looking out for his own followers.
But not true.
The earthquake didn't happen for Paul and Silas' sake, it was all for the jailer!

And it works!
The jailer's first question is, "What do I have to do to get saved?"

Why did he ask that?
Why didn't he just order everyone back to their cells instead?
Why didn't he ask, "Why haven't you all run away?"

Of all the questions he could have asked, this inquiry about salvation seems odd.

What must I do to be saved? Saved from the God who brought this earthquake
Maybe he heard P & S proclaiming the way of salvation in prison.
Maybe he remembered the words of the demon possessed girl,
'these men know how you can be saved.'

He wanted to know what he had to *do*, which is what everyone wants to know.
How do I have to live,
where do I have to send my money,
what do I need to avoid and what do I need to try in order to get in good with God?

Most people approach salvation the same way they approach their health:
there's got to be a winning formula out there somewhere.

So they ask their doctor, "What do I have to do to be healthy?"
And the doctor says: you need to exercise every day, give up smoking, monitor your cholesterol, get plenty of fruit and fiber into your diet.

Very few people assume that good health will just happen.
You have to do *something*.

People come to ministers the same way. "What do I have to do to go to heaven? How can I get right with my Maker?"

What must you *do* to be saved? Nothing.
The "doing" part was Jesus' contribution to salvation.
All that's left for us is to believe that he really pulled it off on our behalf.
Just believe that Jesus did it all for you and you're set for life...eternal life."

Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved!
The jailor has been saved from physical turmoil...
makes him open to spiritual salvation.

A person saved from cancer, from near death experience, car accident...

Are often more open to spiritual salvation.
Because they realise how quickly life can be taken from you.

So Paul offers him spiritual salvation in all its simplicity.
Clear, but profound.

There is no ritual, prayer, good works, religious practices, baptism.
Simply putting your faith and trust in JC

To believe in the Lord Jesus encompasses so much...
Seeing our sinfulness and need of forgiveness,
and putting our trust in the one who shed his blood for us on the cross.
Who was raised from the dead, and has been exalted.

Believe in the Lord Jesus ...so much in that statement.

The jailer takes the apostles at their word and believes.
The apostles then baptize him and his family,
and we end up with a house full of joy and laughter.

We never do find out the name of this man.
But we do know that this man's story is your story and my story
and every Christian's story.

We know that how he was saved is how we are all saved...
by a grace that paid no attention to our deserving;
a grace that wiped out all our sins past, present, and future;
a grace that should be as startling for us as it was for this jailer.

Paul and Silas are now family...with the jailer.
Imagine the incredible picture of two prisoners sitting down and eating with the jailer
and his family.

This would have been unheard of.
But in JC there is no difference, no Jew or Greek, slave or free etc.

Imagine that first church in Philippi.
A Jewish business woman, perhaps a slave girl freed of demon possession, a
Roman jailer and his family. They are now all one in Christ Jesus.

That's what it's like in our church today...
We are all different, yet we are all one.
The playing field is levelled...
All sinners saved by the grace of God.

Conclusion

The key image of sin is presented as a prison in which captives are bound/chained.

One of the central pictures of salvation in the Bible is redemption...
The release from bondage.

We are stuck, unable to free ourselves in our own strength or resources.
In this state, God takes the initiative...he acts on our behalf.

The story of Paul & Silas in prison and their release is reflected in the stories that surround it.

God breaks people free from the chains that held them.
He breaks us free from the chains that hold us.

The result is 'my chains fell off' as the Charles Wesley song goes.
The shackles of sin are broken...through what God does.

Result, 'I went forth and followed him'.
There is a connection between God's saving grace and being a follower.
The natural response.

We are set free in order to become a wholehearted disciple of Jesus Christ.
Salvation is not being set free to pursue our own personal agendas or self-fulfilment.
Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:15 we no longer live for ourselves.

Satan has you bound in chains in prison.
God seeks our highest and best interest.
Seeks to make us holy...conforming us to the likeness of his Son.
He removes the shackles...the chains that hold us.
He gives us joy, peace, freedom and eternal life.