

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household." Then they spoke the Word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – he and his whole family.

Text: Acts 16:25-34 SS 1/8/12 Isaiah 49:1-6 Mark 1:4-11 Psalm 40
Hymns: 373 (1-4), 373 (5-7), 245, 389 (alt. tune: #449)

THE PRISONERS WHO SET THE JAILER FREE

- 1. Imprisonment**
- 2. Release**
- 3. Freedom**

Fellow believers in Christ,

Recently, our family and some other adults were with a mother and father and their two-year-old son. Something happened that made the little boy cry. But instead of whining and crying and carrying on, he started singing, "Old McDonald Had A Farm" to cheer himself up. It worked. With tears still on his face, he started smiling again. This all happened in about fifteen seconds. It was amazing! Thus the child became the teacher to all of us adults. Life contains many paradoxes. The bully is backed down by his intended victim. The loving attitude of the one being hurt moves the one who caused the hurt to have a change of heart. The one who looks on himself as being a leader finds himself in a situation in which he must follow someone else's lead.

Our text from the sixteenth chapter of Acts presents such a paradox. It tells us about a time when 'the tables were turned' and God brought about a great blessing for everyone involved.

– 1 –

A slave girl had an evil spirit in her from the devil that enabled her to predict peoples' futures. This brought her masters much money. The Apostle Paul cast the evil spirit out of her by Jesus' power. One result was that it ended her masters' profits. For doing that and for preaching about Jesus, Paul and his companion, Silas, were badly beaten. They were thrown into prison, in a maximum security cell. Their legs were fastened in stocks, which positioned their legs in a way that was very painful. Paul and Silas were in a place of physical and mental torture. Yet in the middle of the night when everything should seem so gloomy and hopeless, Paul and Silas *"were praying and singing hymns to God."*

The Lord answered their prayers with a sudden earthquake that opened the prison doors and unfastened every prisoner's chains.

The penalty for a jailer who allowed a prisoner to escape was whatever punishment the prisoner was going to receive. The jailer, assuming that all of his prisoners had gotten away, was going to kill himself. But Paul shouted out that they were all still there. The jailer fell down trembling before Paul and Silas and pleaded, *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”*

Who was truly imprisoned? Paul and Silas could have very easily been depressed, yet they were praying and singing praises to God! How could they do that?? Yes, they were in prison. But their hearts and souls had been set free by Jesus, who tells us *“If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed”!* (Jn. 8:36).

The jailer was the one who had been truly imprisoned. The hymnwriter confesses of himself and all of us by nature: *“Fast bound in SATAN’S chains I lay”* (TLH #387:2). How ironic that unbelievers think we Christians are chained down and can hardly do anything, and that they are free. But as Peter says, they are *“promising ... freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved”* (2 Pet. 2:19).

Since the Fall into sin by Adam and Eve, sin is a part of every human being by nature. Sin is everywhere in the world. Sin is a terrible taskmaster, constantly working to imprison us and enslave us and destroy us. The Bible says that because of sin the unbelievers have *“no hope and [are] without God in the world”* (Eph. 2:12). The torment and hopelessness of sin’s imprisonment is far worse than even what Paul and Silas were put through in jail.

Thus imprisoned by sin the unbelieving jailer trembled in fear before the awesome God of Paul and Silas. Their God had cast an evil spirit out of a young girl, made the earth quake, opened prison doors and removed prisoners’ chains, and kept even hardened prisoners from trying to escape! Their God had given such joy and peace to Paul and Silas, in spite of the unjust cruelty that had been done to them, and where they were! The jailer wanted the God of Paul and Silas to be his God. He pleaded with them, *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”*

“DO”! There was nothing he could do. The Bible says that without God by nature we are *“dead in our trespasses and sins”* (Eph. 2:1). We can no more *“do”* anything to free ourselves from sin than a dead person can do anything to make himself alive!

– 2 –

Scripture tells us, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”* (Prov. 9:10). The imprisoned jailer received the Good News he so hungered for: *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.”* *“Believe”!* All we have to ‘do’ is believe in Jesus Christ, and we’re saved! God had opened the prison doors and removed the prisoners’ bindings. Paul and Silas could have easily escaped from what had looked to human eyes to be a hopeless imprisonment. More wonderful still, God had showed the jailer how simple it is to escape the torment and hopelessness of sin. He couldn’t do it himself. He didn’t have to try to find his own escape. Simply by believing in Jesus he was forgiven and set free from his sins!

Paul and Silas *“spoke the Word of the Lord to [the jailer] and to all the others in his house.”* *“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God”* (Ro. 10:17). Paul and Silas shared the Gospel with the jailer and his family. The jailer knew that they had been put into his prison for preaching about Jesus Christ. Now he and his family learned why Paul and Silas were willing to suffer so much for Jesus’ sake. They were told that it is not what WE do, but what JESUS did for us that saves us. They learned that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, willingly gave His life on the cross for the whole world’s sins, and rose again from the dead. The jailer and his family learned that Jesus gives forgiveness and salvation and eternal life in heaven to EVERYONE who believes in Him. They learned this from Paul who wrote: *“For it is by grace*

you have been saved, through faith – and that not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). There is nothing we can do or must do to be saved. We are saved just by believing in Jesus!

“Then immediately [the jailer] and all his family were baptized.” Jesus says, *“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved”* (Mk 16:16). *“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit”* (Jn. 3:5). None of us can free ourselves from sin and make ourselves spiritually alive. The Holy Spirit works through our baptism to make us born again as Christians. Titus 3:4-5 says, *“When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”* Through the Word of God the jailer and his family heard, and through the Word of God spoken as he and his wife and children were baptized, the Holy Spirit worked faith in their hearts in Jesus, and saved them!

– 3 –

The Apostle Paul asks in the sixth chapter of Romans, *“Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? ... You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness”* (vv. 16, 18). Those who don’t believe in God and obey Him think may they are free to live however they wish. They don’t realize that they are actually prisoners of sin. Either we serve the ways of sin, or we serve God.

After someone has served his time in prison and is released, what a glorious freedom is his if he can leave his old ways behind him and become a productive, law-abiding member of society! Paul and Silas showed the jailer and his family how Jesus frees us from sin. They were given joyful freedom and a whole new life in Christ! Scripture says, *“If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. Old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new”* (2 Cor. 5:17).

Their new-found love of Christ showed itself in their lives. The jailer personally washed his former prisoners’ wounds. He and his family desired and received baptism. They took the former prisoners into their home and fed them. Those new Christians rejoiced greatly!

When Jesus sets us free from sin, He turns our whole life around for the better. Jesus gives us heartfelt joy in our new freedom: *“Be happy, your sins are forgiven”* (Mt. 9:2). *“The love of Christ controls us,”* Scripture says (2 Cor. 5:14). We are so grateful to God for all does for us. We don’t have to be afraid of God’s punishment for our sins. We don’t have to worry that we haven’t done enough to deserve to go to heaven. We KNOW that by faith alone in Jesus we are saved! We experience God’s love changing us, and our lives, for the better! We love God, and we want to live our lives for Him.

Life contains many paradoxes. Sometimes the tables are turned, with wonderful results. Such is the case in our text for today about **THE PRISONERS WHO SET THE JAILER FREE!** Amen.