

# The Philippian Jailer

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Littlebourne - 9th July 2023 - Acts 16:25-40

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Last week, Paul and Silas were arrested and imprisoned. They're accused of bringing new customs to Philippi. They've clearly had an impact in the city, as opposition to them is fierce. They've been beaten and placed in the innermost part of the prison, the jailer having been commanded to guard them securely.

## v25-26

*25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, 26 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.*

First, let's notice that Paul and Silas, despite being imprisoned, seem to be quite alright. Far from home, locked up, not knowing what would happen, and yet they fill their time with praise and prayer.

We are often prompted to pray when things take a turn for the worse - it's easy to remember to pray when things are going wrong. But conversely, it's sometimes much easier to praise when things are going well, and doesn't come as naturally when things are going poorly. Our desires and needs get in the way of our contact with God.

Our tendency is to avoid thanking God when things are not good in our eyes. But Paul and Silas join in singing hymns in addition to their prayers. It might not be easy to thank God when things are going wrong, but we'll see that God takes this situation and turns it to good. There's always room to thank God, no matter the circumstances.

Notice also that they weren't quiet about it - their prayer and praise was public, to the extent it could be in that situation. They weren't ashamed of their reliance on God. The other prisoners heard it, and listened.

This is not the first time we've seen prison doors opened supernaturally. In chapter 5 verse 19, an angel of the Lord opens the doors to the prison that the apostles were locked in and brings them out. In chapter 12 Peter is released from prison by an angel, who leads him out of the prison right past the guards.

But this time is a bit different. This time, rather than a quiet sneaky escape, that isn't realised until morning, there is an unmistakable sign that things are happening. There's an earthquake - not just any earthquake, but a great earthquake, shaking the foundations of the prison.

An earthquake so great, that all the chains and fastenings are released. You can imagine the jailer was mortified. Why would God use this method this time, rather than the jailbreaks we've seen before in Acts? Presumably because in His plan, this was not just a miraculous way out of trouble for those imprisoned, but a witness to His power and ability to release the captives and set His people free. A witness to the jailer, as we see when we read on.

## v27-28

*27 When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."*

The jailer awakes, as you would expect in a great earthquake, and sees the prison doors opened, the chains released, the prisoners no longer prevented from leaving.

Remember back in chapter 12 (verse 19), after Peter has walked out of the prison, that Herod had the guards executed. There were serious penalties for losing prisoners in the Roman world. The law of the land in that day was that the guard that lost a prisoner got the penalty that prisoner was awaiting. Guarding a prisoner on death row was a matter of life and death for the guard too.

In this case, the jailer would have realised that suicide would be a much more quick and painless option than whatever kind of execution he might have received for losing prisoners - when Romans executed people, they didn't do it nicely. Even if it wasn't death that he faced, it would have been a great dishonour and the end of a career. Suicide was the honourable way out.

But the prisoners, including Paul and Silas, don't go anywhere. Paul tells him that they're all still there. I can guess that Paul and Silas felt that God wanted them to stick around for some reason. The other prisoners though - were they that affected by what Paul and Silas had said, that they also stayed when they had ample chance to make a break for it?

## v29-30

*29 And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*

The jailer is rightfully shocked. Why would the prisoners not attempt escape? This isn't anything like he might have experienced as a jailer before.

Maybe he was listening to Paul and Silas as they prayed and praised, maybe he sees their reaction to the situation is much calmer than anyone else. Whatever the case, he, in fear and trembling falls before Paul and Silas and seeks their advice. "What must I do to be saved?" It's the most important question that anyone can ask possibly.

We don't know whether the jailer was asking about salvation from his superiors, salvation from coming punishment for what had happened at the jail, or whether he's talking about salvation in the ultimate sense.

I suspect that he was really asking about salvation from God. He had a way out of the punishment from men - suicide - but this man realised that his position before God was more important than his position before men. Suicide, death, was no escape from the judgement of God. He needed deliverance of a sort that Paul and Silas were praying and singing about.

Whatever the case, Paul wastes no time in telling him the gospel.

## v31-

*31 And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."*

Paul sums it up - "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved". He doesn't tell the jailer to be better, or to do some particular right thing. He doesn't say that the jailer must do anything more than believe. At other points in Acts, we've seen a similar message - often it's repent and believe, repentance and faith are required.

There have been debates in the past as to what comes first, which is required first, between repentance and faith, but the thing is that they really come together. A true believing faith, is a repentant faith. A true repentance, is one only possible through faith in Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. They come together.

When we look at the various evangelistic messages in the Bible, we see a variety of approaches. Even in how Jesus talks to people, there's different ways to come to people, so it's not always going to be the exact same starting point that we reach for. The ultimate message in its fullness is the same, but Jesus for example talks to the rich young ruler about the law - He needed to expose the man to his sinfulness so that he could recognise his need. But Jesus talks to Nicodemus, the pharisee, or Zacchaeus, the tax collector, in very different ways.

Ultimately, salvation rests in the power of God - our belief in the Lord Jesus is a belief that He has really done it all for us. We trust that He has done it all.

Paul doesn't just say the jailer would be saved, but his household too. We see this elsewhere in Acts - Cornelius and his family in chapter 10, Lydia earlier in this chapter. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, when we were reading about Lydia, that the influence of the head of a household is significant. We have statistics from recent years that if the head, the father, is first to convert, then there's a 93% chance the rest of the house follows. When Paul said this, I'm sure he was guided by the Holy Spirit and could say with confidence that the rest of the jailer's family would join him. But let us realise that God has structured the family in such a way that the father leads, and here also we see that God works to save whole families as well as individuals.

## v32-34

*32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptised at once, he and all his family. 34 Then 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.*

Paul speaks the word of the Lord to the jailer and all in his house, who believe. Just as we've seen before, they are baptised very quickly.

These verses about households being baptised are sometimes used as part of a justification for infant baptism. Now we don't actually see an infant baptism anywhere in scripture (not that that means it's not acceptable), but then neither do we see baptism as we often do it today either.

Our tendency is to leave baptism pretty late - almost an afterthought often. We baptise people who have been professing Christ for years already, but for whatever reason just haven't got round to it. (This is what happened to me, baptised after being a Christian for some time and then it was 'let's set a date months away when it's convenient'. Hardly immediate.) I think this would have perplexed the early Christians who seemed to get baptised immediately, as soon as they professed faith.

Then, just as Lydia did, he takes them home and entertains them. He and his whole household have believed in God and rejoice in this.

## v35-

*35 But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." 36 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." 37 But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out." 38 The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. 39 So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. 40 So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.*

After the events of the night, the magistrates decide that Paul and Silas can be released. They had been imprisoned there to appease the crowd to start with, and there's no reasonable cause for them to be kept. The magistrates who followed the crowd have come to their senses. Maybe they too felt the great earthquake and realised the error of their ways.

You might expect Paul and Silas to breathe a sigh of relief and leave the prison, but Paul takes the opportunity to make clear the injustice of the situation and not let the magistrates get away with it easily. He makes them recognise that what they had done was wrong and that they had acted rashly.

Not only were Paul and Silas innocent, they were Roman citizens with rights, so Paul makes an example of their release and makes sure it's done publicly, not secretly.

There's a balance to be had between the idea that true Christianity often leads to suffering in this life and the idea that we should avoid suffering where possible. Paul tells Timothy that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). On the other hand, here, they protest what has happened to them and make clear the injustice of the situation.

The right approach is not to seek out suffering. We shouldn't self-flagellate, we shouldn't be reckless and unwise. We should avoid suffering to some degree, but we shouldn't avoid it at the cost of the gospel. Paul and Silas could have backed down and fled as soon as they realised things were getting hard in Philippi, but they stuck around and continued to preach, leading to their suffering.

We can also be clear that suffering inflicted for our faith is unjust - we don't have to just lie down and take it, but we can, in the right way, defend ourselves and call it out. We might not suffer ourselves very much for Christ, but we should be clear about the injustice of suffering in others when we see it.

Lastly, Paul and Silas re-join Lydia, encourage the brothers and sisters in Philippi and move onwards to the next town that God calls them to.

## **Conclusion**

Going to Philippi was never the plan for Paul and his friends - they went there only because God called them there. But when they got there, God had his purposes for them, despite it seeming to be an unfamiliar place. Hardly any Jews there, further from home than ever before, but God worked powerfully to make a church that Paul later writes to with high praise.

The same God that throws open the jail doors throws open the grave and welcomes those He has called out to new life - this is what God does even in the direst of circumstances, as He did in Philippi.