

Moving Heaven and Earth

Acts 16:16-34

Today we're going to talk about a prayer that moved both Heaven *and* earth. It's found in Acts 16:16-34. Paul and Silas have been thrown into prison because, while visiting the city of Philippi, a servant girl "had a spirit by which she predicted the future."

This was not a spirit that came from God. This was a strictly commercial enterprise. This servant girl earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. And for some reason she followed Paul and Silas around, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

And she did this, not for a moment, or an hour, or a day. She kept this up for many days. Which sounds like a good thing, but Paul became annoyed. So annoyed, in fact, that he turned around and said to the spirit in her, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" And at that moment the spirit left her.

Which was good for Paul, and good for the girl, but bad for the slave girl's owners. Because they made a lot of money off of her predictions. And now they were going to lose their source of income. So they dragged Paul and Silas to the marketplace and made false accusations against them before the local magistrates.

The magistrates ordered that Paul and Silas be stripped and beaten with rods and then thrown into an interior cell, the darkest part of the prison. This was not the highlight of Paul's ministry! Or was it?

The first thing to consider this morning is this: **how do you respond to life in your weakest and worst moments?** Because in our weakest and worst moments we get to understand what we really believe and see what we really value. Verse 25 tells us how Paul and Silas reacted: "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them."

In what might have been their weakest and worst moment, in a dark damp prison cell, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. Is that the way you respond when you find yourself in a really bad situation?

Were they worshipping God because they expected God to rescue them? Were they praying for rescue, or were they praying for strength? Were they praising God for His goodness? Scripture doesn't say. But whatever they were praying for it was powerful enough to break open the prison doors and yank shackles off hands and feet.

Think of it. In their weakest and worst moment, when everything had been stripped away from them, Paul and Silas proved Who they truly believed in and what they truly valued.

Which brings me to our second question from this scripture lesson: "**who is listening to you?**" Look at verse 25 again: "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and

singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” That’s important: other prisoners were listening to them.

You and I are sometimes contagious. People around us notice our mood, our attitude, our words, our actions, our inaction. Now, don’t misunderstand. I’m not encouraging you to act happy when you’re devastated. I’m not suggesting that you fake faithfulness and gratitude when your world is coming apart.

I’m simply saying that in our weakest and worst moments people will see the tiny flicker of faith in God, the tiny glimmer of hope that comes from knowing that your life is not consumed by your present circumstances, but by your trust in God. And someone will be listening to you. And when they listen, will they hear the hope of God in your life?

Hear this: our faithfulness, our obedience doesn’t have to involve big and impressive efforts. It can be something as simple as listening to someone who needs to talk . . . or praying a simple prayer . . . or sharing a book that touched our life with a friend. It’s not our ability that God uses to mend broken lives—it’s our faithfulness.

Last question to consider from our lesson today: **who needs to be set free by your example?** When Paul and Silas were faithful to God in their weakest and worst moment, when they prayed and sang praises to God from inside a prison cell, they proved that freedom is found in knowing God.

And their prayers and praise didn’t just free them. It broke open the doors and loosed the shackles of all the prisoners. Which was just the start of the freedom tsunami that God unleashed that day.

Verse 27 says that the jailer awoke and, assuming the prisoners had all escaped, he pulled out his sword and prepared to kill himself. But Paul stopped him. He and Silas could have walked out to physical freedom, but they stayed behind because God had a greater plan to use their suffering to bring more people to faith in Jesus Christ.

And the jailer, overwhelmed by their faith and sacrifice, asked them what he could do to be saved. There’s another person set free! Paul and Silas told him to believe in the Lord Jesus to be saved. Then they taught him about Jesus’ life. The grateful jailer took the men to his house and washed and bandaged their wounds.

The final verse in our lesson reads, “**The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; and the whole family was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God.**” He and his whole household came to faith in Jesus Christ and were set free by the example of Paul and Silas.

The prayers of Paul and Silas didn’t just give the prisoners a brief moment of freedom. They set all the prisoners free. Which led to the jailer and all the members of his household coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Which set all of them free. Which led Luke to

write the book of Acts which has led countless people to freedom in Jesus Christ over the past 2,000 years.

It's my hope and prayer that we'll remember this story and trust God in our weakest and worst moments. That we'll be able to pray and praise God, not to receive anything from God, but simply because we know that life and hope are found only in Him.

And I pray that through our example, as individuals and as a congregation, we'll show others the truth of Jesus Christ. So that the story of freedom through Christ will continue, to the glory of God.