

Moving Heaven and Earth

Scripture: Acts 16:16 – 34

A story: a Chinese gentleman was visiting USA and his host took him to play golf. This was a new experience for him. When he returned to China, a friend asked what he had done in the USA. He replied – ‘I played a most interesting game. I hit a little white ball with a long stick in a large cow pasture.’ His friend asked him – ‘What was the game called?’ The Chinese gentleman paused for a moment and replied – ‘I think it was called ‘Oh, No!’”

Some of us may have played the game of ‘Oh, No’ And maybe even on a golf course!

Another golf story – a golfer told his caddie that he would move heaven and earth to be able to shot under a 100 on the golf course. The caddie, who had walked with him for 18 agonizing holes told the golfer – ‘Well, you had better start trying to move heaven because you have been trying all day to move the earth and it is not getting you anywhere!’

Today, let us talk about a prayer that moved heaven and earth. It is found in Acts 16:16 – 34. Paul and Silas have been thrown in prison. Here is reason for their incarceration – while visiting the city of Philippi, Paul and Silas were followed for days by a servant girl who had a spirit inside of her which would predict the future.

Please notice that the spirit did not come from God. This servant girl earned a great deal of money for her owner by fortune telling. And yet, for some reason, she is following Paul and Silas around and shouting ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.’

She keep do this for days! That does sound like a positive thing, but Paul did not think so. We are not sure of her motive but finally, Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and spoke to the spirit in her. Paul said – ‘In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!’ At that moment the spirit left her!

This presented a problem for the slave girl’s owner. They made money off of her predictions and they wanted to punish Paul and Silas for interfering with their source of income. So the slave owner dragged Paul and Silas to the marketplace and they made false accusations against Paul and Silas before the local magistrates. The magistrates ordered Paul and Silas be stripped and beaten with rods. After their beating, they were thrown into an interior cell in prison. This was the darkest part of the prison.

Imagine visiting a foreign city in which you are falsely accused of a crime, you are attacked by a violent mob, you are stripped naked and beaten, and you are thrown into a dark prison cell. Few of us will ever endure that kind of violence and injustice. But many of us know what it is like to lose everything that is important to us. Many of us have lost a loved one. Many of us have suffered a severe loss. Many of us know what it feels like to be trapped and alone and beyond help.

Everything that was secure is lost.

So our first question today – How do you respond to life in your weakest and worst moments?

I am not asking this question to shame anyone. I am asking this question because our weakest and worst moments expose what we really believe in and what we really value.

So how did Paul and Silas respond to being treated so unjustly? In verse 25 it says – *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.*

Think of that! In their weakest and worst moment, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. In their prison cell, Paul and Silas were praying and singing constantly to God.

Is that the way you respond when you are placed in a really bad situation? How would you answer the question? Do you think Paul and Silas only worshipped God because they expected that God would rescue them? Were they praying for strength? Or were they praising God for his goodness?

Whatever the content of their prayers, it was powerful enough to break open prison doors and yank shackles off of hands and feet.

Think about it – in their weakest and worst moment, Paul and Silas proved who they truly believed in. When everything had been stripped away from them, Paul and Silas showed what they truly valued!

I do not believe they prayed to God to save their lives, I believe they prayed and praised God because in God they found the true purpose of life. What could be more freeing than that!

A second question today – When we pray and sing songs of praise to God, who is listening?

In Paul and Silas' case – the other prisoners and jailors were listening. You and I can become contagious! I know that telling you that you can become contagious has a bad side in this time during Covid, but you and I can become contagious to others!

Other people will notice our mood, our attitude, our words, our actions, and our inaction. Do not miss understand me – I am encouraging each of you to act happy when you are devastated. I am not suggestion that you fake faithfulness and gratitude when your world is coming apart. I am saying that in our weakest and worst moments people will see the tiny flicker of faith in God. Let us allow others to see 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. Will they hear the hope of God in your life?

Do not be intimidated by the fact that others are listening to you. People do not get comfort and hope from your adequacy. In fact, the opposite is true. Your inadequacy and your helplessness offer up faith and love for others. Your praying will have the power to bring hope, light, life, and love to others who are in the same prison you are in.

And a final question for you today – Who needs to be set free by your example? When Paul and Silas were faithful to God in their weakest and worst moment, they proved that freedom is found in knowing God. When they prayed and sang hymns from their prison cells deep within the prison, they showed others their faith in Jesus Christ. Their prayers and praise did not just free them, it broke open the doors and loosened the shackles of all the prisoners. But that is just the start of the freedom tsunami they unleashed!

In verse 27 we read that the jailor awoke and assumed that all the prisoners had escaped. The jailor pulled out his sword and prepared to kill himself. But Paul stopped him. Paul 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 many more people to faith in Jesus Christ. And the jailor who was overwhelmed by faith and sacrifice, asked Paul and Silas what he could do to be saved.

Paul and Silas told the jailor to believe in Jesus Christ to be saved. Then they taught him about Jesus' life. The grateful jailor took the men to his house and washed and bandaged their wounds. In the final verse of our scripture passage today it says – *The jailor brought them into the house and set food before them. He and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.*

The jailor and his entire household came to faith in Jesus Christ and were set free by the example of Paul and Silas.

In the novel 'The Shawshank Redemption', a wrongfully accused prisoner named Andy keeps talking about finding hope in prison. His buddy, Red, does not want to hear it. Red thinks it is foolish to look for hope in their circumstances.

One day Andy barricades himself in the prison warden's office and plays a Mozart opera over the prison PA system. The music is so beautiful that the prisoners pause their daily activities to listen. Even the hardened and angry prisoners pause and listen. Even the violent ones pause and listen. And as Red listens to the opera in the prison exercise yard, he understands a little bit of the hope Andy feels. Red says – 'I tell you, those voices soared higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dare to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away. For the briefest moment every last man at Shawshank was free!'

The prayers of Paul and Silas did not just give the prisoners a brief moment of freedom, they set all the prisoners free. Which led to the jailor and all the members of his household coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Which set all of them free.

The Book of Acts has led countless people to find freedom in Jesus Christ for over 2000 years. And it is my hope and prayer that you will remember this story of Paul and Silas. And you will trust in God that at your weakest and worst moment, you will be able to pray and praise God. Not to receive anything from God, but simply because you know that your life and hope is found only in Jesus. And I know that your example will show others the truth of Jesus Christ. And the story of freedom through Jesus Christ will continue, to the glory of God.

AMEN.