

Bring Our Souls Out of Prison

Acts 16:16-34

In his letter to the church at Philippi, written while under house arrest in Rome waiting for his case to be heard by the emperor Nero, the Apostle Paul wrote that he knew the secret of being content with his circumstances, no matter what the situation.

In today's reading from the Book of Acts, we see the truth of that statement, as both Paul and Silas were brutalized and imprisoned by the authorities in Philippi, yet sang joyous hymns of praise and shared the Gospel with their Philippian jailer.

If we truly believe, even in these times of suffering and injustice, that God knows what He is doing and is shaping our lives according to His plan, then we must believe He can use every aspect of our lives to achieve His purpose, even if we are cast into prison. We can be content, we can continue to do the will of Him Who — saved us ... is saving us ... and will save us on the Day of Judgement — we can sing His praises, even in such a circumstance.

Paul and Silas were wrongfully convicted, given sentences far out of proportion to their alleged crime. They were guilty of nothing more than upsetting the apple cart of the wealthy and powerful, a transgression for which society seems to reserve its harshest punishment.

They had freed the captive mind of a disturbed young slave, spoiling business for some greedy men who had calculated a way to profit from her sickness.

Yet the apostles were cruelly beaten (an action the authorities would later regret when they learned Paul was a Roman citizen) and confined in what prisons today would call maximum security.

Paul had been sent to Macedonia by God Himself in a vision. His ministry with Silas was confirmed by the conversion of Lydia of Thyatira, the first convert in Europe, and now they were in leg irons behind bars in Philippi.

Had God's plan for Paul and Silas so quickly come to nothing? Did they, in despair, pray the words of the Psalmist, ..."Bring our souls out of prison that we might confess Thy name?"

An auspicious earthquake opened the door, both literally and figuratively, for the apostles to preach the Gospel to the jailer and his entire family, an opportunity that would never have come had they not been

imprisoned.

God had plans to build a strong church family in Philippi. I imagine that Lydia, and the jailer and his family, and the slave girl that Paul healed, were an important part of that church family.

Clearly, Paul and Silas did not meet these people by accident. It was all part of God's divine plan for His children in Philippi.

Paul would someday write to the Philippians from Rome, "I am so pleased that you have continued on in this with us, believing and proclaiming God's Message, from the day you heard it right up to the present. You have, after all, stuck with me all the way from the time I was thrown in jail, put on trial, and came out of it in one piece."

He's referring to that time in Philippi when he and Silas were beaten and imprisoned. Paul is rejoicing that his friends who began to believe in Jesus as a result of those events were still being faithful to the Way.

Paul goes on to write, "I want to report to you, friends, that my imprisonment here has had the opposite of its intended effect." He's speaking now of his imprisonment in Rome by Nero. "Instead of being squelched," he writes, "the Message has actually prospered. All the soldiers here, and everyone else, too, found out that I'm in jail because of this Messiah."

Why is he telling the Philippians this? Because it's exactly like what happened in Philippi! His imprisonment has once again become an opportunity for the Gospel, and he knows his Philippian friends will understand and rejoice again, because they saw God perform the identical miracle in their midst years before.

For over forty-five years, as I have been blessed to work in prison ministry and among the poor on the streets, again and again, I have had the privilege of witnessing spiritual births ... as young men were "born again" into God's forever family, behind the bars of their cell and, over time, grew to become mature believers. Gang members, murderer's, thieves ... transformed into strong disciples of Jesus and active witnesses of Christ's life-changing power.

We do not know what God's plan is for us or for others. We only know that He can work with any of us. A slave girl, a jailer, a prisoner, a former gang member. And you and me.

Glory to Jesus Christ! ✠✠✠