

[paul + silas]

:: acts 16.16-40 ::

We have a famous text this morning. Acts 16.16-40. Let me read it for us and then we'll make a few comments.

Acts 16.16-40 - Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation."

And this she did for many days.

But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And he came out that very hour. But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities.

And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, "These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe." Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 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 chains were loosed. And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here."

Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household.

And when it was day, the magistrates sent the officers, saying, "Let those men go." So the keeper of the prison reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Now therefore depart, and go in peace."

But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out."

And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans. Then they came and pleaded with them and brought them out, and asked them to depart from the city. So they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

I think there's a lot to learn and a lot to challenge us in this text. It's one of the more famous stories in the book of Acts, and it is remarkable, but I can't help but read this passage and the rest of the book of Acts without thinking to myself, "why isn't this happening in my life, or at least around me today?" Especially when we realize that the book of Acts is meant to be open ended, it's meant to continue as you and I walk the disciple road and do God's work where He's placed us. We don't really see this sort of thing happening in our city or in our nation.

Of course, we look outside our nation and we see all sorts of miraculous situations like this happening. If you get Gospel For Asia's email newsletter you see reports all the time of incredible things happening through the lives of Christians. In other locations and organizations we hear about God moving in more Acts-like ways.

So, the question is, why don't we really experience that here? It's the same God. It's the same world. It's the same message. Yet, there seems to be a lack of the dynamic outpouring of God's power in and through our lives. Our lives don't seem to fit into the book of Acts very well.

When we look in the word and see what Jesus promised us and the plan He laid out for us and then when we see the examples of men like Paul and Silas and others in the New Testament, we have to come to the conclusion that the reason we're not seeing this sort of not just miraculous, but Godly activity has to do with our willingness and submission before the Lord. Because, in this prison account of Paul and Silas we see men who were absolutely, unquestionably surrendered to the Spirit of God and because of that, God glorified Himself in magnificent ways.

It started, of course, at the beginning of the chapter. Paul and Silas are sailing around trying to get into Asia, trying to get into Mysia and all these other places, and the Spirit forbids them. We don't exactly know how that worked, but they were in tune with God's leading and were willing to allow Him to determine their next activity. They didn't force their way into a place that would've been comfortable or prominent or filled up with their key demographic. They understood that God was sending them and they were content to not just be sent, but to be directed as well.

It's then that they received the famous Macedonian call. Paul gets this vision, they head down to Philippi and a church is established. We just finished a study through Paul's letter to the church that was started there.

That's when we come to our text. And for our purposes I really want us to key in on two simple aspects we see in these guys. There are two things they powerfully demonstrate to us through this imprisonment: A willingness to suffer and a vision to save. To me, those are two of the key elements to living a life that is filled up by the Spirit of God like we see in the book of Acts.

First of all, we need to notice their willingness to suffer. Because, at any point in this story, from the moment they're dragged into the marketplace forward, Paul and Silas could've completely avoided the suffering they endured by saying 4 little words: ***We are Roman citizens.***

That's it. That would've been the end of this story. They would've been asked to leave and they would've been on their way. But interestingly, they kept that information to themselves and endured not only illegal injustices, but great physical pain and torment. Why? Because that's how the Spirit was leading them and they were surrendered to the Lord.

We know that because there was a time later on where Paul was about to be beaten and he stops them beforehand and says, "uh, I'm a Roman citizen." But, here, because they were in tune with God and because they were willing to suffer, this incredible situation unfolds and we'll see what the results were in a moment.

We're obsessed with comfort in America. We're obsessed with safety and security and wealth and maintaining the status quo. But that kind of thinking doesn't further the work of God. Because, when we're focused on how comfortable or stable or wealthy or secure we are, then our thoughts become inward instead of outward and we start thinking about how uncomfortable it is to suffer and how much easier it is to just fly under the radar, living our lives without any friction and getting to the finish line at a nice, slow pace. But that isn't discipleship.

The problem is, when we avoid spiritually uncomfortable things or when we try to avoid suffering in our relationship with Christ, we're taking on the mindset of Jonah. Jonah went the other way because he hated Ninevites, but the bottom line was the same. God has called us to specific people and specific places and He's told us that preaching and serving and suffering *ARE* going to be a part of our lives here on the earth. But what we tend to do is get inward, inward, inward and we lower the bar enough so that we can try to avoid all suffering and all sacrifice and all discomfort. We're quick to pull the Roman Citizen card so that there's no friction and so that we can get back to life undisturbed.

Or maybe, if we don't want to use the Jonah analogy, we're just more like John Mark back in Acts 15. John Mark had been on the mission field with Paul and Barnabas but it was rough out there. It was uncomfortable and unstable and scary. So, at one point, when the team got to Pamphylia, John Mark said, "I'm out. This is too tough." And he left. In that moment he decided he'd rather just head back home and let other people do the tough stuff. And if we're not careful, this is what we do. We start thinking that the Christian life is about having a comfortable existence and just not participating in immorality. But what we see in the Gospels and in the book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament is completely different than that low-level of spiritual living. And if we want to get deeper into God and into the kind of life that we're called to on the pages of Scripture, then we need to wrestle with our willingness to suffer.

Because these guys were willing to suffer, because they were willing to endure, a demon-possessed girl was delivered, an entire prison was evangelized, the keeper of the prison and his whole household was saved and the brand new church was protected from the hostile city.

Yes, the suffering that Paul and Silas endured was intense, but as we look back and see what God did through this situation, don't we think it was worth it? Paul was willing to hold back his Roman Citizen card. He followed the Spirit's leading even when it led them into a pitch black dungeon. Their feet were bound in these terrible stocks. From verse 33 we find that they didn't

even wash the wounds and legions that were left from the beating they received. But Paul and Silas were willing. They were willing because they had vision to save others.

The picture is so wonderful. There, sitting in the pitch black darkness of a Philippian dungeon, they're ministering to people they can't even see. The jailer had to call for a light after the earthquake. But they're sitting there, bleeding, and they say, "hey, let's do some ministry. Let's pray and sing." And they were so surrendered to God that even when a miraculous earthquake opened the doors and broke their shackles, they still stayed in the prison.

Now, I would've thought that was a sign from God that it was time for me to leave. But they understood from the Holy Spirit that something else was going on. People were about to be saved. The local church was about to be built up in a remarkable way. After all, once God gave Paul the okay to drop the Roman Citizen bomb, the city officials just wanted to make sure he wasn't going to press charges, so they'd leave this little group of Christians alone.

Paul and Silas had a vision to save those who were in spiritual darkness. And they understood that the work of sharing the Gospel includes suffering. It's not optional, it's included.

This story is amazing, but it's not meant to be uncharacteristic of our own lives.

Now, don't get me wrong, we shouldn't try to cause persecution or suffering, but, what we see in the Bible is that when God's people are being Spirit filled and Spirit led, the result is always friction with the world. And, I don't know about you, but there's not a lot of friction in my life. On one hand I'm thankful for that, but on the other hand it worries me that maybe I'm more concerned with my own wealth and my own comfort than I am with someone else's eternity. And that's something I need to work through and wrestle with. Because the only way that this jailer and his family were going to be saved and the only way that this little church was going to be protected in this way was through the terrible, unjust suffering of God's people. That was God's will. In that suffering, God was able to show how strong He is. That He controls the earth and the elements. That He is a God of longsuffering grace. That He is strong when we are weak. That His people have nothing to fear and that His Gospel is the only real hope that matters. It was only by Paul and Silas' suffering that all this was accomplished in Philippi.

I want to love the Philippian jailers around me more than I love comfort. And I want God to take hold of my life so that I'm in tune with what He wants and what I should do so that He might be magnified through my life.

But I have to take hold of the fact that those things God wants to do, this work He's called me to, requires suffering. And if I run from that, if I kick against that, if I settle for less Spirituality for a little more security, then I'm taking on the mind of Jonah and John Mark. I want to be like Paul and Silas. I want to find satisfaction in Christ. I want to be unafraid and willing to suffer for Jesus and I want to have a vision to save those who are moments away from an eternity in hell.

If that's what we want, then it's time to take up the life that Christ explained to us in His word and see where He takes us today.