

Philippian Jailer Converted

ACTS 16:16-40

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This past Wednesday evening, Patsy gave me the numbers from our Bible correspondence course program, and she reports that during the month of November, we sent out a grand total of 1,048 lessons. This includes lessons being sent out to 87 brand new students. And as we have pointed out before, many of our students are inmates in various prisons around the state of Wisconsin. As we think about this figure and as we think about the awesome work that is being done with this program, I want us to take just a moment to study one of the most famous prison scenes anywhere in the Bible, it is a scene that takes place in the Macedonian city of Philippi. The account is found in Acts 16 (p. 1732). By way of background, I want look first at the events leading up to this scene. Paul and Silas are on Paul's Second Missionary Journey. Paul leaves Antioch at the end of Acts 15. He and Silas are traveling through Asia Minor, strengthening those churches they had established on the First Journey. And in the middle of those efforts, Paul has a vision in Acts 16:9, a man from Macedonia was appealing to Paul and saying, ***"Come over to Macedonia and help us."*** So, Paul makes a beeline for Macedonia (or Northern Greece), and he heads directly for the city of Philippi, a Roman colony settled primarily by retired Roman soldiers. On the Sabbath Day they go to the riverside, where they find a small group of women who had assembled for the purpose of prayer. Paul explains the good news, and Lydia is baptized immediately, along with her entire family. And this is where it starts to get interesting. Notice, please, Acts 16:16-24,

¹⁶ It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸ She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment.

¹⁹ But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, ²⁰ and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, ²¹ and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans."

²² The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. ²³ When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; ²⁴ and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Most of you know that I have made many visits in various jails and prisons around Wisconsin. I have had my Bible x-rayed more times than I can remember. I have been poked and prodded, I have had to remove my shoes and belt times without number. I've studied the Bible in large groups on benches and tables bolted to the floor, I've studied in the back rooms of various chapels, I have studied under the watchful eye of guards, I've been left alone, locked in rooms one-on-one with violent criminals, arsonists, murderers, sex offenders. I've had to leave everything in a locker, even the pen I normally use, because it could be considered a dangerous weapon. I've had my hand stamped with invisible ink on the way in so they can verify my number on the way out to make sure I haven't traded places with anybody. I've been in the maximum security wing of our state's leading mental health facility right here on the north side of Madison – many times – through the razor wire, through the metal detector, buzzed through half a dozen doors and gates, subjected to background checks. And with all of this as background, I would point out: Unlike our very modern prisons here in Wisconsin, the prison in Philippi did not have a basketball court. There was no indoor plumbing. There were no fans. There was no air conditioning. There was no healthcare. There were no televisions. It was, instead, a brutal existence – especially when we remember that Paul and Silas are completely innocent of all charges. So here they are, beaten without a trial – no justice whatsoever. No medical care, gaping wounds, dried blood, and on top of all of that, their feet are fastened in the stocks. Basically, they are being tortured. Instead complaining, though, I want us to notice what happens next. Notice, please, Acts 16:25-34.

²⁵ But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; ²⁶ and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" ²⁹ And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, ³⁰ and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. ³⁴ And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

This passage has taken quite a turn, hasn't it! We start out with Paul and Silas being thrown in prison, and we end up with a brand new Christian family. This morning, for the next few moments, I would like for us to review what the jailer actually did that resulted in his own salvation. And it is important that we do this, because if we can follow his example and do today what he did nearly 2000 years ago, then I would suggest that the result will be the same. Does that make sense? If he was lost and then became saved, then certainly we can do the same if we are willing to do what he did. This is the reason why this passage is in the Bible! And I think we'll find that the process is actually very simple. We don't need 2000 years of church tradition to figure this out, we don't need some kind of priest or religious leader to come in and tell us what this really does or doesn't mean – instead, we just need to look at it honestly and follow this man's example.

I. **As we look at the process here, I would point out first of all, that THE JAILER REALIZED THAT HE WAS IN A LOST CONDITION.**

And this might seem rather basic, because it is! Up in verse 30, the jailer asks the question, ***“What must I do to be saved?”*** This is one of the most important questions any of us could ever ask. Some have tried to dismiss this man’s question, though, by suggesting that he only wanted to be saved from the earthquake. And yet by this time the earthquake was over. Some have suggested that he only wanted to be saved from execution by the Romans. Roman law, of course, said that anyone responsible for prisoners was subject to the punishment the prisoner would have received had he not escaped. This explains why he was getting ready to take his own life (in verse 27). Some have said, then, that the man simply wanted to be saved from punishment at the hands of the Romans. Note, though, that the question comes only after he discovers that all of the prisoners are still there. If he’s already saved from the earthquake, and if he’s already determined that nobody has escaped, what, then, is the man asking? Notice what happens right before the question (in verse 29): He calls for lights, he rushes in, and trembling with fear he falls down before Paul and Silas. The question, then, is addressed directly to Paul and Silas, ***“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”*** Out of all the people in prison that night, why go to Paul and Silas?

I believe the answer is found back up in verse 25, where we find that ***“...about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.”*** Is it possible to learn something from a song? Absolutely! There is another possibility back up in verse 17. Do you remember the demon-possessed servant girl? Do you remember what she was saying? In verse 17, that young woman was following Paul, crying out, saying, ***“These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.”*** Very interesting! And remember, this girl was the reason why they were thrown in prison. It is reasonable, then, to believe that the jailer went to Paul and Silas for a reason. The jailer knew at least a little bit about what he was dealing with here, and so he comes to Paul and Silas with a spiritual question. He knew that he was lost, so he went to Paul and Silas wanting to know, ***“What must I do to be saved?”***

And again, this is an excellent question – ***“What must I do,”*** not “What should my dearly departed grandmother have done?” But, ***“What must I do?”*** The question is very personal. The jailer, then, could see that he personally was in a lost condition and that he personally needed to do something about it.

II. **As we move forward in this passage we see a second stage or step in the jailer’s salvation, and that is: The jailer HEARS THE WORD OF GOD AND HE ACCEPTS IT AS BEING THE TRUTH.**

Upon hearing the honest question, Paul and Silas speak up in verse 31, and the first part of their answer is, ***“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”*** So here is a man who knew basically nothing spiritually, so Paul and Silas tell him that he needs to believe in Jesus. Immediately, then, Paul and Silas continue in verse 32, ***“And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house.”*** And so a critical step in being saved, then, is to hear the good news, to hear the word of God. And for those of us as Christians, I would remind us: This is where we come in! This is our job! As we come across people around us who seem to have an interest in spiritual matters, our role is to speak up. Our job is to say something. Those who do not know about Jesus need to be taught.

I would point out, though, just hearing the good news and believing it is not all that is necessary here. Many people in the denominational world have yanked verse 31 out of context. And so they say, ***“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved,”*** as if that is all there is! The scriptures very clearly teach that belief in Jesus is

NOT all that is necessary. We think of the religious leaders in John 12:42-43, ***“Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.”*** Here are people who believed in Jesus, but they were too scared to do anything about it. Were they saved just because they knew who Jesus was? No, they were not.

I would point out, therefore, that believing in Jesus is the beginning of the process, not the end. Hearing and believing the message is not the complete answer to this man’s question. Believing in Jesus is the introduction, not the conclusion. They started, then, by telling this man to believe in Jesus, and then they went on to explain what this belief would look like. We think of what Paul wrote in Romans 10:17, that, ***“...faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”*** So, to believe in Jesus, this man needed to hear the word of God, and that is exactly what Paul and Silas did (in verse 32), ***“...they spoke the word of the Lord to him....”***

We are not explicitly told that the jailer DID believe in Jesus at this point; however, it does seem rather safe to assume based on what happens next. He doesn’t reject the message of Jesus; instead, the message seems to touch him in the heart.

III. Notice what he does as soon as he hears the word of the Lord: He makes a concrete change in his behavior – sometimes we refer to this as REPENTANCE.

In verse 33, ***“...he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds.”*** Repentance is a change of heart that results in a change in the way we live, and that is exactly what we see here. Here is a jailer, most likely a retired Roman soldier, most likely a rather tough individual. I have several friends who work in corrections. One friend recently retired as the head warden at a federal prison up in Minnesota, one friend works at a different federal facility up in Minnesota, one friend works as a jailer down near Chicago, and then we have at least one of our members here at Four Lakes who has worked in corrections as well. And if I can summarize my personal experience with these men: They are men of strong character who are not prone to being easily manipulated. There is a certain mental toughness that is required for dealing with inmates day in and day out. And with that in mind, trying to imagine the typical warden or the typical jail commander, think again about what happens in verse 33, ***“...he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds.”***

What a change has taken place in this man’s life! One day he is perhaps the man who orchestrated this brutal beating, and just a few hours later he is on his knees begging these men for salvation, he hears the good news about Jesus, and he is now washing their wounds. He is making this effort to undo what he has done. He is showing remorse and regret. This is the heart of repentance, a change of mind resulting in a change in the way we live.

IV. As soon as the jailer changed his outlook on life, as soon as he had that change of heart, notice what he does next (in verse 33), ***“IMMEDIATELY HE WAS BAPTIZED, he and all his household.”***

Now, where did he get this strange idea that he had to be baptized to be saved? It is interesting that it happens immediately after the preaching of the gospel, and that the preaching of the gospel was done in response to the question, ***“What must I do to be saved?”*** In other words, the Philippian Jailer learned about baptism from ***“the word of the Lord”*** that was spoken in verse 32! And amazingly, this is a pattern that repeats itself over and over again in the book of Acts.

- In Acts 2, the Jews who were responsible for killing Jesus interrupted Peter's sermon and said, ***"Brethren, what shall we do?"*** Does that question sound a little familiar? After that question, the first words out of Peter's mouth were, ***"Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins...."*** At that point, 3,000 were immersed in water and were added to the Lord's church.
- We think about Ananias explaining the gospel to Paul. Paul saw the Lord in a vision, and after three days of prayer and fasting, Ananias explained the gospel to Paul, and in Acts 22:16, Ananias said to Paul, ***"Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name."***
- We think about the Samaritans who were baptized in Acts 8. In Acts 8:12, the Bible says, ***"But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike."*** The preaching of the good news caused them to see the necessity of baptism.
- We think about the Ethiopian officer in Acts 8. He was riding in his chariot on his way back home, reading from the book of Isaiah, when he is joined by the preacher Philip. Acts 8:35 says that Philip ***"...preached Jesus to him,"*** and in the very next verse, the Bible says, ***"As they went along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?' ... And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him."*** Once again, therefore, someone is baptized ***"immediately"*** after hearing the gospel message.

There is a good reason for this, of course. The good news is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. We obey that good news by doing that ourselves. We die to sin (repentance), we are buried in water, and we are raised up out of the water to live new lives in Jesus Christ.

What a difference from what many of the denominations around us are teaching on this! I have personally been to denominational services where someone will come forward wanting to be saved, the preacher makes an announcement that the person is now saved, the congregation rejoices that this great thing has happened, and then the preacher announces that the person will be baptized at the baptismal service at the end of the month or at the end of the year. I would ask, though: Why didn't the jailer wait until the end of the month? Why didn't he wait until the next day? Why didn't he at least wait until the sun came up? Didn't this man realize how hard it is to be immersed in a river in the dark? He was baptized in the middle of the night because his soul depended on it! As Peter would go on to write later in 1 Peter 3:21, ***"Baptism now saves you!"*** At the point of baptism, this man's sins were washed away, and he and his household were saved from their sins. Once they understood who Jesus was, once they understood the concept of repentance, once they understood the act of baptism, this man and his family did it – and according to verse 32, they did it ***"immediately...that very hour of the night."*** In the same way today, baptism ought to be done immediately, as soon as a person understands what the Bible requires – whether it is after a sermon, in the middle of the week, or even in the middle of the night. Some of my best memories from growing up are getting awakened out of bed in the middle of the night, going to the church building in my PJ's, and watching my dad immerse someone into the Lord. Baptism is something a person is to do ***"immediately."***

To the best of my memory, I have personally baptized somewhere between 70-80 people in my life. Looking back over all of those moments, I can think of only two who were baptized during a worship service. The rest were all baptized maybe on a Sunday afternoon after studying the scriptures one-on-one, the rest were baptized at all hours of the night and day, many times with just a small handful in attendance, sometimes just

me and the one being baptized. From time to time, someone will complain after the fact, “Oh, I wish the person would have waited so that more people could have seen it. Oh, I wish they could have waited until Sunday morning so the kids at church could have seen it.” I would suggest, though: That is not what happened here. I would also point out: As far as we know, this man had never even been to a worship service at this point. He was lost, he was told what he needed to do, he had a change of heart, and he was baptized into Christ immediately.

- V. **As we come near the end of this passage, I would point out one additional step in this process, really, more of an observation, and that is: After baptism, the Bible tells us in verse 34 that the jailer “REJOICED GREATLY, having believed in God with his whole household.”**

When did he rejoice? He rejoiced only after his sins were washed away at the point of baptism. I would point out here: If someone is happy that their sins have been washed away before baptism, then they have rejoiced a little bit too early! We do not rejoice when we are still in our sins. But again, thinking about the denominational world here, that is exactly what we see. We see this plan mixed up a bit – we have believing in Jesus, rejoicing, to be followed by baptism at a later date. Or with those who baptize babies, we have baptism with much rejoicing, followed 12 or 13 years later by belief and then more rejoicing, and maybe repentance, who knows? It is all mixed up! But that is not what we see here in Acts 16. In Acts 16, the man saw he was lost, he heard the good news, he had a change of heart, he was baptized for the forgiveness of his sins, and only then did he rejoice. He was happy because he was now a believer. I love how Luke, the author of this passage, words this – he **“rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.”** This is what becoming a believer looks like – hearing, believing, repentance, and baptism, resulting in salvation. And again, the rejoicing in this passage fits in with other rejoicing in Acts. The Ethiopian officer in Acts 8 was baptized, and then he **“went on his way rejoicing”** (Acts 8:39). Saul, who had been praying and fasting for three days, broke that fast and started eating again, only after he had been baptized into the Lord for the forgiveness of his sins. And that is what happens here: The jailer rejoices, but only after he is fully obedient to the Lord.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I would invite you to look with me at what happens the following morning. By the way, this is the only time the word **“policemen”** is found in the Bible. Notice, please, Acts 16:35-40,

³⁵ Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, “Release those men.” ³⁶ And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, “The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Therefore come out now and go in peace.” ³⁷ But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out.” ³⁸ The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, ³⁹ and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city. ⁴⁰ They went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

What an awesome passage! The city council pretty much wants Paul to disappear. Paul, though, points out that he is a Roman citizen, “You want us to leave quietly, even though you have beaten Roman citizens without a proper trial? I don’t think so. You need to come here and let us out yourselves.” [paraphrased] Paul,

then, wanted the official escort, and he got what he wanted. I want to emphasize what Paul did here: He went to the house of Lydia. He went to the place where the church was meeting. And what he did here was to protect this new congregation. He was saying to the city leaders: You don't mess with these people! Paul had them in a predicament. The city leaders had violated Roman law, and Paul used that to protect this brand new congregation. Looking back on it, I would ask: Why didn't Paul bring up his citizenship BEFORE the illegal beating (as he did later in the book of Acts)? Why did he wait to bring this up? Based on what happens in this closing paragraph, I would suggest: Paul willingly allowed himself to be severely beaten, because he knew that some good would come from it. Paul followed the example of Jesus, who laid down his life for others. I would suggest: If Paul had played the citizenship card the previous afternoon, we would not be studying the Philippian jailer's conversion this morning.

And with that, we have the beginning of the Lord's church in the city of Philippi, a strong congregation that would soon have elders and deacons, a congregation that would very quickly become one of Paul's most active supporting congregations.

As we close, we would like to invite those who have not yet done so, to obey the good news. God's plan is very simple. When a person wants to be saved, he or she must hear the word of God, must then have a change of heart concerning sin, and must then be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. Today, as it was 2000 years ago, a person can be baptized at any time of the day or night. Personally, I have baptized people in lakes, and rivers, and swimming pools, and cattle troughs, and in baptisteries – during church services, and in the middle of the night, publicly and privately. If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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