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Scripture Text: Acts 16:22-34

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The Saving Power of God

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Acts 16:22-34. Let's return to our series of sermons from *The Book of Acts*, which I prefer to call *The Acts of the Risen Jesus through His Spirit-filled Church*. We noted two Sundays ago that Paul and his missionary associates, Silas, Luke and Timothy, had come to a standstill in Troas, where Paul subsequently received the vision of a man who called them to come over to Macedonia and help them (16:9). They promptly left for Macedonia, taking the message of Jesus for the first time to European soil. They arrived in Philippi, the leading city of Macedonia, where they were received by a businesswoman named Lydia, who, along with her household, were their first converts in this key city.

Paul and Silas encountered a spirit-possessed girl (*The Message* paraphrase calls her a psychic), who had followed them around and had become an interruption to their preaching. Paul exorcised the demon from her, which angered some businessmen who had made their living from this girl's psychic powers. These men then stirred up an angry mob by casting some anti-Semitic slurs against Paul and Silas, accusing them of disturbing the peace. So, the

Roman authorities stepped in and took severe action against Paul and Silas, which leads us to our text for today.

Read **Acts 16:22-34**.

The Book of Acts is full of accounts of remarkable conversions, but none more dramatic than this one in our text. Extraordinary as it is, this conversion of the Philippian jailer serves as a model for any conversion in its essential elements. Every true conversion contains the same basic elements, even though the lifestyle and circumstances are likely to be radically different from those in our text.

What we see in our text, which we can see in every conversion, is a demonstration of the converting power of God. In his letter to the Romans, Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (1:16a). We must never forget or underestimate the power of God to change any human heart and life.

Those of us who have had less remarkable conversions and/or who have been confessing Christians for a number of years are inclined to take our conversion for granted. We often fail to appreciate that the fullness of God's power was involved, even for those of us who came to faith during childhood or youth. I think you will agree that, even though your circumstances were very different (as were mine), the elements of this conversion in our text were and are to some degree operative in your conversion experience

Coming to a new appreciation for the power of God to change lives will also encourage us in our witness for Christ. We are aware that in post-Christian Western Europe conversions seem to occur seldom and in small numbers. Leading another to faith in Christ often involves a long process of relationship building, and at times it seems nothing is happening in our evangelism. We can take heart as we look at the conversion of this jailer and realize that we serve the same Almighty God who saved him. He can do it again. As Isaiah said, "Surely the arm of the Lord is not short to save" (59:1).

The saving power of God **is seen in...**

➤ **The witness of God's people**

God's power to save involves his people. We have seen throughout our study of Acts that the risen Lord Jesus continues to do the work he began in his incarnation through his followers (1:1). And the human instruments that he uses are shown throughout *The Book of Acts* to be his witnesses, not in human and institutional power and influence but rather...

- *In human weakness and suffering*

Paul and Silas are contrasted with the societal, political and military powers that surrounded them in Philippi and which seemed to have these itinerate missionaries at their mercy. And in themselves, Paul and Silas were very weak. But as Paul understood, that was to their advantage, because God's power could take over and stand out for others to see. This was Paul's message to a church that was overly impressed with human power and giftedness. God's power rests upon the one who recognizes his/her weakness and relies totally on God's power (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Paul referred to this experience in Philippi (one of the three times he was beaten with rods) when he boasted of his sufferings to a church that thought spiritual leaders should boast of their impressive gifts and credentials (2 Corinthians 11:25).

God works his saving power through the faithful witness of his weak servants, who are willing to follow the way of the cross in a cruciform life of weakness and suffering. This jailer, who following orders after they were publicly stripped and beaten, fastened Paul and Silas' feet in stocks in a maximum-security dungeon. To all appearances, these missionaries were victims of abuse and at the mercy of the authority of representatives of the mighty Roman Empire.

But Paul and Silas knew something that his accusers, the government authorities, soldiers and the jailer didn't know: their God was in complete control of their circumstances. Just as sovereign God had worked redemption through his suffering Son upon the cross, so his purposes for redemption were being carried out through the injustice and suffering poured out on Paul and Silas. God would work mightily through the witness of these suffering messengers. Just as God's saving power came through the weakness of the suffering, dying and rising Jesus, so God's power would prevail through these faithful witnesses. For a time they would have to share in the sufferings of Jesus so that in sovereign God's time they would also share in his triumphant resurrection power and vindication. This confidence in God's triumphant purposes was the reason Paul could boast to the Corinthians about his sufferings, which included this beating in Philippi (2 Corinthians 11:16-33, esp. verse 25). Paul realized that the message of Jesus was *God's power* for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:16a).

Paul and Silas were strengthened to be faithful as weak and suffering witnesses...

- *By prayer and worship*

Our text gives us another "how much more" argument. If Paul and Silas could pray and worship in an obvious spirit of joyous praise in these circumstances, how much more should you and I always be able and willing to so worship? Realize, they were publicly stripped, beaten with rods (like a caning in some

societies today) and thrown into a maximum-security dungeon. Their feet were placed in stocks, with were either iron clasps or wooden stocks, placing them in a painful position.

Let's be honest. For some of us, had we been in similar circumstances, the first impulse would have been to complain against the authorities for this injustice. Had that effort failed, we would have complained to God for allowing this to happen as a result of our desire to serve him. We then would have felt justified in our quitting this missionary business and going home, where at least we would expect to be treated with a modicum of respect.

But God uses his faithful witnesses who are willing to trust and obey, even during the "dark night of the soul," when circumstances tempt us to doubt his power, love and wisdom in the ways he chooses to work through our lives. The key to this faithfulness is our focus on God through the disciplines of prayer and worship, as we see in Paul and Silas. They chose to respond to their bleak circumstances with the acts of prayer and worship, which resulted in a deep peace and joy. They, like the psalmists, remembered their 'songs in the night' (Psalm 42:8; 77:6).

In this spirit of worship, Paul and Silas prayed. Perhaps they prayed the psalms of praise and trust in the vindication and deliverance of the Lord. And with this strengthened focus on God and renewed confidence in his steadfast love and faithfulness, they prayed for the spread of his kingdom and glory. This would mean that they would have prayed for those who were their avowed enemies in Philippi, and those, like the jailer who had just humiliated and abused them. They knew that God would work through their prayers to bring about some great conversions in the lives of great unbelievers and sinners. Like the church in Jerusalem, they probably didn't pray for easier circumstances or the stoppage of abuse against them, but rather they prayed for even greater boldness and power in their witness (Acts 4:23-31).

Their worship included songs of praise, trust and thanksgiving for what God was doing and was going to do through their lives. Whatever they prayed and sang must have made an impression on the other prisoners and the jailer. As we note in the question that the jailer asked Paul and Silas, he had been made aware of his need for some kind of salvation and that, because of the message Paul and Silas sang, these missionaries would have the answer he desperately sought. God worked through the witness of their words but also through the power of their prayers, which he continues to use in the conversion of sinners. God uses praying, worshiping and faithful people, faithful through weakness and times of suffering, in his work of converting others, who also will become his worshipers (John 4:23f).

But also the saving power of God is seen in...

➤ The awakening of the spiritually dead

God worked through the witness of his messengers, but also was working in the mind and heart of the jailer, who was as Paul says we all are apart from Christ—dead in transgressions and sins (Ephesians 2:1). Paul and Silas knew what we need always to know and remember, that God the Almighty does all of the saving. He who created us and sent his Son to die and raised him from the dead for us is able to save all who believe (Ephesians 1:19f).

In every aspect, this jailer was...

- *An unlikely prospect*

Perhaps Paul prayed specifically for this jailer and as he did so he remembered that he also, at one time, was the world's number one sinner (1 Timothy 1:15). He realized that grace that would and could reach to him and transform him could do the same for anyone, including this hardened jailer.

We need also to realize that this jailer was a Roman soldier and a total pagan, with no knowledge of God and the message of Jesus. Although we in this culture appreciate the need to build relationships with nonbelievers, we must also believe that immediate conversions are possible.

This jailer was not only ignorant of Scripture and the message of Jesus, but also had grown calloused and indifferent to human suffering. I suppose if we could have surveyed the possible converts in Philippi and their “reach-ability” for the kingdom of heaven, we would have found this jailer close to the bottom or off the bottom of the charts entirely. Paul perhaps thought that just as he own conversion was an example to others of an extremely unlikely case, so there also was hope that God would use this jailer as an example to others of what he can do (1 Timothy 1:12-17).

We should never despair over someone who seems to us unlikely to convert to Christ, but rather look on her as a special target for God's grace and a unique opportunity for his glory. Not that we should spend all our time and witness on her or him. We should, like Paul, take our message to the receptive. But we should never “write off” the so-called “hopeless cases,” but keep them in prayer, maintain lines of communication and trust that God can do great things for his glory as he accomplishes his sovereign purposes through...

- *The work of the Spirit and the Word*

This account of the conversion of the jailer describes the crucial role of the Spirit and the Word in his conversion. It's possible that the jailer had heard the message of Jesus through the preaching of Paul and Silas. I suppose most of

the city had heard about Paul's exorcising the demonic spirit from the local psychic, who had testified "ad infinitum ad nauseum" that Paul and Silas were God's servants proclaiming "the way to be saved" (verse 17). And then he probably heard the message of Jesus through the praying and singing of Paul.

But in any case, the jailer knew very little of the message and in due time, he would come to know enough to believe on the Lord Jesus. But already, in his pre-conversion life, the Spirit of God was at work. The seed of the Word, small as it was, had fallen on "ground made fertile" by the Holy Spirit. The light of God was at work to awaken him. His heart was now prepared for...

- *A life-shaking experience*

It seems that the more hardened unbelievers and sinners require a special jolt to awaken them to their need for God. It takes as much grace to save a young person or child, since we are all guilty sinners and are saved not just from past but future sins. But the older one grows often the more resistant to the message of Jesus and the work of the Spirit.

Thus, for the jailer, it took an earthquake to shake him loose from his hardness and false sense of security and complacency. Because the earthquake broke open prison doors and the chains that held prisoners to the walls, everyone was set free. According to Roman law, the jailer was responsible for the prisoners. If they escaped, the jailer had to pay with his life (as we saw in Acts 12:18f). Thus, seeing that the earthquake had freed his prisoners, the jailer was ready to commit suicide, preferring death at his own hands to a disgraceful death at the hands of his authorities.

Earthquakes were frequent occurrences in the region of Philippi, but this one came at a divine moment in this jailer's life. And this is the way God works in bringing about conversions—just the right experience at the right moment of life. His mercy sometimes is quite severe in order to bring about everlasting good and shake unbelievers free from whatever is keeping them from God's saving grace, mercy and forgiveness. It may be a violent shaking, such as the breakdown of one's health or marriage or the loss of a job or the death of a loved one. It may be a less traumatic shaking but one just as profound, such as a word from a child. Sometimes God speaks through the wind, earthquake and fire, but perhaps more often through a gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:12).

I recall one of my seminary professors of New Testament theology, Dale Moody, telling an experience when he preached in a small rural Kentucky church and taught the children to sing choruses he wrote using Scripture texts. Dr. Moody loved to find passages from the New Testament that were possibly used in the singing of the earliest churches and then put these scriptures to music. One of the children went home singing the chorus from Ephesians 5:14,

“Wake up, O sleeper,
Rise from the dead,
And Christ will shine on you.”

This little girl’s father was a hardened unbeliever and a known alcoholic who was an abuser, not only of substances like alcohol, but also his family. But this damaged father also dearly loved his little girl and because of his abusive behavior felt intense guilt. The evening this girl went home singing this chorus, she awakened her drunken father, who demanded that she sing the chorus again. Hearing these words from his little girl awakened this hardened sinner as nothing else had done. And, as Professor Moody shared with the class, this man, shaken by the Word of God, called on the preacher and asked essentially the same question as the jailer: “What must I do to be saved?”

God knows what is needed to bring us to the awareness of our need for his salvation. For the jailer it took a life-ending earthquake to awaken him to his need.

And next, God’s saving power is seen in...

➤ **The transformation of a new believer**

We can see the jailer’s transformation in process, even as he called for lights and rushed into Paul and Silas’ dungeon cell and fell before them in a gesture of total submission. After bringing them out, he asked a question that ever since has been a model “sinner’s prayer,” bringing the missionaries’ answer that is a “standard” reply to inquirers after salvation (30 & 31).

NT Wright argues that we shouldn’t read too much theology into this question and answer. We import into this exchange layers of theology that would have been unknown to this pagan Roman jailer. He knew nothing, says Wright, about God’s justice and the punishment awaiting those outside of faith in Christ. Salvation for him meant only getting out of his desperate dilemma and being saved from the death sentence that awaited him. Thus Wright translates the question of the jailer, “Gentlemen, will you please tell me how I can get out of this mess?” For the jailer, says Bishop Wright, it would have been irrelevant for Paul and Silas to give the standard evangelical instructions about how to go to heaven when we die. He knew nothing about heaven and hell, claims Wright (See page 66, *Acts for Everyone, Part Two (Chapters 13-28)*).

I tend to agree with the good bishop, an excellent New Testament scholar, that this jailer was unschooled in the way we understand salvation through faith in Christ, and that he was asking for a way of escape from his desperately felt need for deliverance. And I think this sense of desperation is how God draws hardened sinners to himself. And we need to think of the message of Jesus as

good news that relates to the most pressing and immediately felt needs of human experience. Just as Jesus healed people of temporal illnesses, fed the hungry multitudes, raised the dead and calmed life-threatening storms, so Jesus cares about every human need and wants to show himself as the one who can and will supply every need of ours. And we offer to a desperate world a Savior who can give comfort and strength in life's worst situations and who can lead people out of trouble into a redemption and restoration. Jesus saves in all sorts of ways and he begins to work in people's lives in tangible bodily ways just as he gives us the hope of the resurrection of our bodies in the redeemed heavens and earth. We don't promise people they will "go to heaven when they die" but rather we offer them a Savior who gives the immediate gift of eternal life.

Thus Paul and Silas offered the jailer a full and complete...

- *Salvation by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus*

Paul and Silas didn't have time to give the jailer a course in systematic theology, but they did explain that salvation, even our immediate rescue from difficulty, is based on simple faith in Jesus. The jailer asked, "What must I *do*?" And essentially the answer was, it's already *been done* for you. All you must *do* is to *do nothing* but believe in Jesus, who has already *done everything* for you. As *The Message* paraphrases the answer of God's messengers, "Put your entire trust in the Master Jesus" (31).

Salvation, both God's immediate help and his gift of the forgiveness of all sin and a personal relationship with him for now and forever in his redeemed creation, is the free gift of God. That's what **grace** means—**God's Riches at Christ's Expense**, what we desperately need but could never earn or deserve (Ephesians 2:8-9). Although the jailer's knowledge was limited, I give Paul and Silas a bit more credit than does Bishop Wright for imparting at least the essentials for faith in Christ. I think he had heard their preaching, their praying and their singing and when the earthquake struck, his heart was ready to receive instructions. He knew he needed to be saved, both in time and for eternity.

Paul and Silas said he must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Along with the others in Philippi, especially among the Roman soldiers and officers, he had declared his loyalty to Caesar as Lord. Now he was told to make Jesus his Lord, which doubtless would involve a great price to pay. But the only way to receive free and saving grace is through surrender to the Lordship of Christ (Romans 10:9, 13).

Paul and Silas didn't just lead him in a "sinner's prayer," chalk him up as another convert, and then leave the jailer to fend for himself as a newborn spiritual baby. They immediately involved him and "all the others in his house" in a thorough Bible study (32). These missionaries set the new convert on the road to spiritual growth and maturity.

Just the week before last, at the annual meeting of the International Baptist Convention, a professor from a seminary in the US made a disturbing comment. The evangelical church in America is in trouble, he said, because the churches have emphasized worship (probably more as an entertainment experience) and neglected teaching. We've encouraged people to come to Jesus but have failed to make disciples. And many of these so-called converts have simply made decisions that seemingly make no difference in their lives.

Just this past week I was reminded from *The Book of Hebrews* that "We must pay more careful attention...to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away." And also, "how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" (2:1, 3). We must beware, *Hebrews* warns, that we haven't just "tasted the heavenly gift," but are rooted and grounded in Christ (6:4-6). God's grace is free but certainly not cheap. It cost God his Son and costs us our lives of surrender and obedience to the Lordship of Christ as we take up our cross daily and follow him (Luke 9:23).

Salvation is not just a one-time experience, simply receiving a "free ticket" to heaven. It's a process of transformation and growth that begins the moment we first believe and culminates the moment we see Jesus face to face in glory (1 John 3:2). We have been saved, i.e. made right with God. But we also are being saved, and must continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). The assurance we have that we indeed have been saved is our growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, our maintaining in reverent dependence a vital and personal relationship with Jesus (2 Peter 3:18).

This jailer was saved by the power of God. He was brought, by grace through faith, into a life-changing relationship with Jesus. His life was transformed and the jailer's eternal salvation was...

- *Evidenced in a changed life*

This jailer's life was changed, and he gave evidence by immediately washing Paul and Silas' wounds. Jesus gave the story of the Good Samaritan in answer to the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" which is basically the same as the jailer's question. To the expert in Jewish law who wanted to justify himself and prove to himself he possessed eternal life Jesus told a story that left him condemned. Jesus said that eternal life is characterized by the kind of love that causes us to care for a neighbor in need (in this case a hated neighbor). Apparently this kind of love was missing in the religious expert's life. But it was evident in the life of the newly converted jailer, who took care of Paul and Silas the way the Good Samaritan took care of the man who had been beaten (Luke 10:25-37). By the virtues of kindness and love, the jailer was making his calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:5-10).

This is repentance on display. The jailer made an about face in his thinking and in his actions, and was ready to express his new life through baptism. As the great “Golden Mouth” preacher of the ancient church, John Chrysostom, he who had washed the wounds of Paul and Silas received a greater washing in his baptism by the washing away of the wounds from his sins (page 208, New Testament vol. V, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*).

Joining him in his baptism were the members of his family, who also believed in the Lord Jesus Christ (33). The jailer gave evidence of his conversion by his becoming a disciple-maker of others, beginning with his own family. Already his life began to bear fruit, in character and in multiplying himself in the lives of others, beginning with his own family, where our evangelism and discipleship should begin. And not the least fruit of the Spirit in the life of this converted jailer was joy (verse 34 & Galatians 5:22). He celebrated his and his family’s new life with a festive meal, which may well have included the Lord’s Supper (See I Howard Marshall, *Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, page 274). But in any case, he was filled with deep gratitude and joy in his newfound relationship with the risen Lord Jesus and his new spiritual family that included Paul, Silas and other believers who lived in Philippi.

The saving power of God always leads to joy, God’s joy, pleasure and delight in us and our joy and delight in God. This now is our earthly pursuit and will be our everlasting business, the enjoyment of God by living for his pleasure and finding our deepest pleasure in him.

Conclusion:

I pray that the God’s word to us today has stirred us to a new realization of the great work of God’s salvation. Regardless of the time or circumstances when you and I came to faith, we must appreciate that we were saved, are being saved and will finally be saved on that final Day of human history by the power and unmerited goodness of God. We are saved by the same power that saved the Philippian jailer. Our need for Jesus is just as desperate as was the jailer’s need.

Like this jailer, we too must bring our lives under the Lordship of Christ. No doubt his new commitment to Jesus as Lord brought some trouble to him and his family. How could he remain in the service of the Roman government when Jesus and not Caesar was his only Lord and Master? He too would become one of God’s cross-bearing, suffering, humanly weak witnesses who would forevermore live by the power of God. We must also follow Jesus in the way of the cross, willing to suffer for him and follow wherever he leads.

And I hope we are encouraged to never give up praying and hoping for the salvation of staunch unbelievers and great sinners. God specializes in the

impossible and we must be encouraged that if God can save this jailer he can save the hardest and most adamant and difficult-to-live-with unbeliever. Great sinners often make the greatest converts.

So, as we live for Jesus and relate the love of Jesus in this environment, which is so spiritually dark and resistant to the message of Jesus, we must remember. Philippi was a dark, pagan and even a hostile place for God's servants. We shouldn't ask for an easier place to live for and serve Christ. Rather, we should believe absolutely in the saving power of a risen Savior and a living God. Because Jesus saved this jailer, he could save you and me; and if he can and will save you and me, he can and will save anyone who calls on him (Romans 10:13).

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. In what ways was the jailer an unlikely candidate for conversion to Christ?
2. As you remember your conversion experience, recall the ways God worked through Scripture, prayer, witnesses and circumstances to bring you to faith.
3. What was it about the witness of Paul and Silas that should characterize our witness for Christ?
4. Why is it likely that some people may have to experience life-shattering circumstances before they come to repentance and faith?
5. What was involved for this jailer to believe in Jesus as Lord? What price do you think he would have to pay?
6. What actions showed that the jailer had experienced a genuine conversion?
7. Do you think joy is an essential sign of conversion? Why or why not?

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