

Acts 16:25-34: The Philippian Jailer

OUTLINE

The question of salvation

The sign of salvation

The joy of salvation

INTRODUCTION

The book of Acts give us some wonderful stories of individuals who encounter Christ and get saved. The story of the Philippian jailor is unique because we have for the first time someone who has no acquaintance with the synagogue or the Jews coming to faith in Christ. The Ethiopian Eunuch was visiting Jerusalem and reading the Jewish scriptures; Cornelius was a Godfearer and worshipped the God of the Bible; even Lydia who is saved earlier in this chapter attends a Jewish prayer meeting. But here we have a true unassociated convert. Jailors were typically retired and returning soldiers. Here is man who has faithfully served Rome in its various wars. As a reward for service he is granted land to settle down, and he has settled in Philippi, or 'Little Rome', a place wildly loyal to Rome and Caesar. Imagine a man who has had to fight Rome's wars at a time before the Geneva convention where soldiers would commit various atrocities and have a lot of PTSD from the things they had done, seen and experienced. You have to imagine that a man who is able to run an ancient jail with its harsh punishments, hard conditions, who has to be able to endure the begging of the prisoners. This is not likely a job that any old person could do. This is the man we meet in our portion.

You will remember when we started through the book of Philippians how Paul and Silas came to be in Philippi. Paul saw a vision where someone from Macedonia was calling to him. In answer to that call Paul and Silas arrive in Philippi. There is no synagogue in this town because there are not enough men to form one. So they head to the woman's prayer meeting where Lydia is Philippi's first convert. Then you will remember that Paul casts the demon out of the demon possessed slave girl. Her owners became upset because they had lost their ability to earn money from her. Paul and Silas are lynched by the owners, dragged before the rulers, and racism against these Jews, and loyalty to Rome stirred the crowd up into a frenzy against these missionaries. They were stripped; they were beaten with rods; and when they had been beaten nearly senseless they were handed over to the jailor for a night in prison before they would likely be ejected and banned from the city the next day. V22-24, 'The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.' We can see by the description that this was a typical Roman prison with an inner and outer section. One description notes, 'The prisons were filthy, poorly ventilated, and were underground]. The prisons would be divided into outer and inner areas. The inner parts of the prison were more secure and darker. Prison would not have had individual cells. They would have had groups of prisoners chained together in different rooms. Prisons would often times be very crowded. The prisons were designed to psychologically and physically torture a prisoner into confessing... The prisons would also be designed to strip the prisoner of dignity.¹ Prisons were for people that were awaiting trial of condemned they did not have the same purpose they serve today; they were thought to be a deterrent and so were

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prisons_in_ancient_Rome accessed 6/15/2023

made to be as uncomfortable as possible to discourage crime. The disciples were put in stocks. This would have prevented them from freedom of movement, and with a freshly beaten back they would have been forced to sit up and not sleep. This was all of course to teach these anti-Roman Jews a lesson in respect.

Paul and Silas are praying and singing in the prison, taking comfort in God and being able to rejoice despite their circumstances. God in His power then sends a miraculous earthquake that frees the prisoners and opens the doors, but the basic structure is still standing. V25-26, 'About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ²⁶ and 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 bonds were unfastened.' The Jailer thinks that his prisoners have fled, and he decides to commit suicide. As a Roman Jailer if your prisoners escaped you would be put to death, this is why we see the extreme reaction of the Philippian jailer wanting to kill himself. In 12:19 we see Herod putting the guards that were guarding Peter to death when he was broken out of jail by an angel. And later on in Acts 27:42, when Paul is aboard a ship full of prisoners that hits a sandbar; we see the Roman soldiers guarding those prisoners wanting to put them to death because the penalty for an escaped prisoner is death. V27-28, 'When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." We will now look at how the jailor gets saved.

We want to examine his conversion in three parts. The question of salvation; the sign of salvation; and the joy of salvation.

The question of salvation

V29-30, 'And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" We come face to face with this man who has been literally shaken up by God. He feared the worst, has been illuminated to the fact that the prisoners are still there. At this point you would expect any number of reactions. He could save face, reestablish his authority, and shout at the prisoners, applying liberal beatings to reassert dominance. He could at least be grateful and thank Paul and Silas for it appears they kept everyone together. Maybe he could let them out of the stocks and wash their wounds. He does none of those things, his reaction is much stronger indicating to us that there is a lot more going on here. Where an ordinary jailor would be thinking about how to get all the prisoners back in chains and gain control of the situation because a riot could break out, this man is trembling with fear, he falls down in an act of respect and asks a question about how to get saved.

What we are seeing here is the reality that God has been preparing this man for salvation. Someone does not suddenly get saved out of the blue, there are preparatory steps where is acting in small and silent ways to prepare someone for salvation. For some it is growing up in a Christian home; God can use personal illness or tragedy; God can use a national crisis. What are some of the things that God probably used in this case? Well, we know he is a man who has served in the army at a time where all sorts of war crimes were common. He is a man who likely has some skeletons in the closet. We all carry the sins of our past with us and we can ignore them, justify them, drown them out with distraction, but God by His Spirit can cause the truthfulness not merely of our sins but our sinfulness to grip us. He gets ahold of our consciences and the Spirit impresses upon us how bad we are and how worthy of judgement we are. He emphasizes the hypocrites we are, how horrible our hearts are compared to the way we present ourselves to the world. Is this a man who would wake

up screaming the night; was he addicted to drinking to drown his memories; was his PTSD spilling over into his family life; was he taking out his anger on the prisoners? Whatever the case; this man when asking for salvation is not talking about being saved from his superiors, but from his sins. Not only that look at Acts 16:17, 'She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."' Here is what the slave girl who had the demon cast out was saying. She was telling everyone that these men were telling everyone how they could get saved; this is the salvation that he is asking about. It is likely that he has come to hear of this salvation further from the prayers and singing of the apostles, perhaps they even gave an outline of their message at their defense and in conversation with the other prisoners. And now the earthquake underlines the closeness of death and the miraculous nature of it impresses upon him that he had better find out more. He knew he was a sinner and needed to be saved. Is this you today? Has God been opening your eyes to the biggest problem that you have, your sins? Has He been impressing upon you the fact that you were made to be in a relationship with Him but you have spurned Him your whole life? That there is a judgement that you have to face and give an account for your life of rebelling against Him?

V30-31, 'Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.'" One of the most important questions we could possibly ask given the best of all answers. How can I be saved from my sins? How can I who deserve to be judged by a holy judge escape that judgement? How can I be cleared on the day of judgement when my sins are so great? His question is probably filled with all sorts of wrong assumptions about salvation. He probably thinks that there is some thing that he must do. If you were in a place of desperation as this man seems to be, you would be willing to do almost anything to wipe away the guilt of your sins. Here was a man who was on the brink of suicide. And it is here that we feel the reality of the good news to such a hungry and desperate soul. 'Believe in/on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.' You can almost see him do a double take, there he was waiting for some grand task or gesture that he could make and here we are told 'Believe.' What does this mean?

You and I are not only sinful before God and liable to judgement. Our problem is worse than that. You cannot stop sinning, even if you tried. And it gets worse still, there is nothing you can do to remove the guilt of your sins. That is the bad news; the good news is that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He sends Jesus Christ to come to earth. He dies on the cross taking the punishment that your sins deserve. But it gets better, He not only takes the guilt of your sins. He also lives a perfect life in your place and is willing to take the guilt of your sin and give you the righteousness of His own life. Imagine every sin you have ever committed put on Christ's shoulders and punished; and imagine every perfect law keeping love filled act of Christ credited to you. So that when you stand before God on judgement day you will not be dressed in the filthy rags of your own righteousness but the perfect righteousness of Christ. But the good news gets even better. How do you get this righteousness? Is there some sacrifice, some act of obedience, some grand gesture you have to make? No, there is no deed good enough that will make you good, God has to offer for free not at a price. So God says that all who believe in Jesus will receive this gift.

This word believe means to trust in, to lean upon, to rely upon, to put your hope in Jesus and what He has done in payment for your sins, and not in anything you can do. It sounds too good to be true, but this is the promise of God, John 3:16, "'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' The jailor we see believes, and this promise is not only for the jailor it is for everyone,

if anyone in his family believes, they too will receive this incredible gift. This verse is not teaching family salvation by one person believing that is a heretical teaching. No it is teaching that if anyone believes they will be saved. So let me ask you, have you believed?

The sign of salvation

V32-34, 'And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. ³⁴Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.' The Jailor wanted everyone in his home to get saved, so instead of believing and getting baptized there at the prison, he took the apostles to his house that his whole family could hear the good news about Jesus Christ. Here was someone who had no background in the OT, who had no knowledge of Jesus Christ and so the disciples do not rush him into baptism, but instead spend time instructing him and his family in the word of the Lord. Some people think that we should preach with an open baptismal pool and just readily accept people for baptism without instruction. Here we see that the disciples were careful to ensure that this man who was unschooled was not getting baptized in ignorance.

Now there are certain signs of this man's salvation. Firstly, we see that his heart is changed towards these prisoners. He whose job it was to inflict wounds is now washing wounds. He brings them into his home and he feeds them. We are seeing a changed life. All true faith has these fruits of a changed life that follows them. If someone says they are saved and there is no change from hate to forgiveness, from racism to acceptance, from cruelty to kindness, then there is no true work of grace in their hearts. Secondly, we see his joy, v34, 'Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.' To have seen the holiness of God; the depth of our sinfulness, and then to know our sins forgiven, ourselves adopted into God's family, and heaven guaranteed before us. Joy is the inevitable emotion that sums up how we feel. But the third sign and the one I want to draw your attention to is the jailor's baptism.

What is baptism? The word baptism literally means 'to immerse'. This was a ceremony begun by John the Baptist in preparation for the coming of the Messiah and a sign that one has repented of their sins and entered into the kingdom of the Messiah. It was not enough to be a Jew, to be born of Jewish parents, or to be circumcised. Every person had to make a choice to repent and prepare themselves to follow God's promised Messiah. This was symbolic act of passing through the Red Sea and leaving the Egypt of their sins behind; a symbol of washing and newness. During the time of the gospels John the Baptist and his disciples; as well as Jesus and His disciples practiced this kingdom baptism of repentance for the Jews. The pattern of individual commitment and repentance in becoming a disciple was well established during this period. I highlight this to show that infant baptism is excluded by this practice. Then after Jesus died and resurrected; having prepared the disciples to now take the gospel of the kingdom to all nations, He gave the Great Commission, Matt. 28:18-20, 'And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" The concept of baptism as an individual sign of commitment; and disciples, who are the committed followers of Christ's teachings; and the content of Christ's teaching (which nowhere teaches infant baptism) were not suddenly sprung upon the disciples here, they were already defined.

Come the day of Pentecost, and the message of repent and be baptized continues. There is not one command to baptize an infant, nor one story of an infant being baptized. There are mentions of household baptism in the book of Acts but in every instance the description of those baptized always describes them as those who heard, or those who spoke in tongues, or those who rejoiced, or those who believed. Some who promote infant baptism have tried to use 16:34 to prove that you only need one adult in the home to believe and all the other members of the family can be baptized upon the faith of one parent. The difficulty with this view is that we would then have to teach that adult spouses and children are included in this assertion creating great difficulties around unbelieving spouses being part of the church. But this matter is easily cleared up. Paedobaptist commentator Simon Kistemaker highlights how the adverb *panoikei* 'with all the household' applies to rejoicing and believing. Even John Calvin admits that this text speaks of a 'godly consent' in the family. They all heard the word of the gospel, they all believed and now they are all rejoicing.

The rest of the NT teaches us that baptism is a sign that tells us about certain realities. Firstly, it is speaking to us on behalf of God. If you have believed, God has united you with Christ in His burial, this is signed by going under the judgement waters, just like the flood. This means that Jesus died your death and suffered your judgement in your place, burial and death speak of the just punishment being satisfied by the death of Christ. But coming out of the water speaks about your being resurrected in Christ. This means that you have new resurrection life in Christ; this means that you are coming away from your sins that you have laid down to a new life of following the commandments of Christ. The water, a common element used in washing speaks to us of the fact that we are now cleansed from our sins. Baptism speaks first and foremost about our union with Christ but also of receiving the Holy Spirit who unites us to the people of God, the body of Christ. We are one with Christ, one with His body and that by the Spirit. Secondly, baptism is also a statement that you are making when you become a Christian. You put yourself in the grace of the water speaking of you putting aside your sins; you come out of the waters as a sign of new life and it speaks of your commitment to following Him. There is a verbal calling on the name of Jesus Christ as your Lord indicating your new loyalties and the new orientation of your life. Your act of baptism speaks of your faith and repentance and commitment to obey Christ for the rest of your life. And that is what Tuia is going to be doing as we witness her baptism today.