

“Jail House Rocked”

Security, Peace and Fear – part #4

Acts 16:11-24 (25-34 in message)

[title slide] Welcome and prayer.

This is the fourth week of our series on Security, Peace, and Fear. I have enjoyed talking about the prophet Elijah and his challenges the past three weeks. However, today we turn our attention to Paul and Silas in Philippi, as we see how they responded to a frightening situation as recorded in Acts 16.

There are few places that scare me as much as jails and prisons. I remember as a child, the sheriff actually gave us a quick tour of the Losco County jail. I distinctly remember some of inmates jumping up to the windows and saying, “Boo!” They would not let inmates see children today – in fact, the last time I took my Cub Scouts to the county jail, we only stayed in the empty juvenile detention room. Still, seeing the handcuffs, the isolation room, and the sparse furnishings all communicated one thing: you don’t want to end up here.

Losing our freedom and being locked away would be upsetting, to say the least. Are there others things in life that make us anxious? How about being injured or being attacked? Physical harm ranks right up there with freedom being taken away. If either of those things happened, it would be a very bad day.

[Paul at Lydia’s house] I submit to you that Paul and Silas were having a very bad day. And the thing is, it started out so well. They were following Jesus, preaching the word, meeting with faithful Jews in Philippi who responded to their message, welcomed them into their homes and were baptized. Acts 16 starts the way we like all churches to start. A missionary comes to town, preaches a message of forgiveness, and the people believe and start following Jesus. Excellent.

[Paul and slave girl] However, no church ever starts without a struggle. Starting at verse 16, we see that Paul and Silas were doing the right thing, preaching the way of salvation. Even the demons recognized this. But Paul was so fed up with the distraction of a prophetic slave girl that he rebuked the spirit right out of her. Check this out: Paul healed the girl of a demonic possession. That is a good thing! And as the saying goes, no good deed is left unpunished.

[Slave owner] The girl’s owners had no concern for her wellbeing. They just wanted to make money off of her. They were very ticked off at Paul and Silas for ending their lucrative business, so they hauled the two missionaries off before the authorities, formed a mob to stir up trouble, and eventually had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in prison.

[Paul and Silas arrested] The details of what happened to these two are appalling. They were “seized” and “dragged to the [public] marketplace”(v.19), falsely accused of stirring up trouble, “stripped and beaten with rods” (v.23), thrown into the “inner cell” of the prison, and had their feet fastened in stocks (v.24). You know what stocks are, right? Those crazy wooden devices they torture people with. In Wild West tourist parks you can have your picture taken in them. But in reality, they are anything but cute.

[Paul in prison] This had to be the worst day ever for Paul and Silas. They were being obedient to God. They were sharing the good news. And as a reward, they were beaten and placed, in stocks, in the worst part of the prison, under heavy guard.

[Bible verse] Have you ever had a day like that? I can think of several bad, painful days I have lived through, yet if Paul were here, he’d tell me, I had it made in the shade compared to him. In fact, he does say so himself in **2 Corinthians 11:23**: “I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.”

Stop and think about the worst day you have ever had. Whatever it was, for just a moment, go back to that place and time. Remember the pain, the anxiety, and the frustration you felt. How did you react? What did you say, think, and do? Did a few “non-Christian curses” slip off your tongue? Did you complain to someone else? Did you complain to God? I’m sure some of us would quietly say, “Amen” to that.

Now, listen to what Paul and Silas did in their prison, as they sat, beaten, bruised, and unable to even move their sore legs.

Acts 16:25. “About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God...”

Wait, what? They were praying and singing? I mean, I can understand praying – they needed help. But “singing praises to God”? That is the most

unusual response to a bad day that I can imagine. So let's finish the passage and see what happened as a response to their incredible optimism and faithfulness in the face of suffering, injustice and fear.

Acts 16:25-34

This section from verse 25 to 34 is an incredible story in and of itself. A jailer was saved because of the witness of his prisoners! But it's even more astounding when you think of what Paul and Silas went through before the earthquake. Because of their witness, the jailer and his whole household heard the gospel and responded to the grace of Jesus Christ.

[Paul, open door] What would you have done? If you were beaten, locked away without a fair trial, and had your legs immobilized by a torture device, would you be singing and praising God? Maybe, maybe not. Let's assume that we really are that much in love with God, though. Go with me down this imaginary road for a moment. You are praying, praising, and asking for deliverance, and suddenly, an earthquake opens the doors and breaks your chains. What do you do next? You run! It's obvious that this is a miracle meant to free you! Back in Acts 12, when the doors fell open, the apostle Peter walked out of his prison. Surely Paul knew that story.

This is troubling. Why didn't Paul and Silas bolt? Why did they stay?

[Jailer with sword] Paul knew something about Roman law that we might have overlooked. Look again at verse 27. The jailer woke up, took one look at the wide-open prison doors, and tried to take his own life by falling on his sword. This might seem strange to you, but remember, the jailer's job was to keep the prisoners locked up. If he failed, the authorities wouldn't say, “Oh, too bad. Try better next time.” No, they would kill him.

Paul and Silas stayed in the prison because they loved this man and did not want him to die. That is true love for our enemies. Jesus taught in Matthew 5:44 to “love your neighbor and pray for those who persecute you” – even if it means staying in prison when you could walk out.

The Bible tells us numerous times to repay evil with good:

1 Peter 3:9 - “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

Romans 12:21 – “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Matthew 5:39 – “But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.”

[Paul and jailer] It was not the miraculous earthquake that convinced the jailer of the truth of Jesus. It was the fact that Paul and Silas risked their freedom, their very lives, by staying in that horrible inner cell long enough to share their witness with this man. The irony is this: the gospel broke out, not the prisoners. The jailer needed to experience freedom; not the inmates, Paul and Silas.

[Jailer washes Paul] Can you imagine a jailer falling at the feet of those whom he previously bound? His first question was, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul and Silas simply answered, “Believe in Jesus.” And then, to solidify his response as a true follower of Jesus, the jailer washed the wounds which he himself inflicted. He brought Paul and Silas into his own home, fed them, and allowed them to baptize him and his whole household. None of this would have happened if Paul and Silas had taken their God-given opportunity to run free.

[Paul and jailer eating] I think Paul and Silas were praying in their cell for this jailer and his household. I think they were praying for all the prisoners who could hear them singing praises to God. Paul and Silas knew what it takes to bring someone the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Do we also know what it takes? How often do we complain about things that frustrate us? Do you know what happens when we do that? People don’t see Jesus. They see anxious, grumpy, defeated Christians. There are so many things we could complain about, and they all pale in comparison to the day that Paul and Silas had.

[Bible verse] My friends, we must not let it be so. We must choose to be people of joy, no matter what the circumstances. **1 Thessalonians 5:18** says “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” In all things, give thanks, even if we don’t see the immediate benefit. Could it be possible that God is using your difficult situation right now to save someone else? It was true for Paul and Silas. Why not us, too?

[Bible verse] Paul, the expert in pain and injustice, says this in **Philippians 4:4-7**: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness

be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Think about what these words meant to the church in Philippi who saw this miracle. When Paul rejoiced, God’s peace was on him in such a mighty way that everyone noticed. That’s how their church started. That’s the way God wants our church to be, as well.

[title slide] Next time you think you’re having a bad day, remember Paul and Silas, and simply ask God, “Show me how this struggle can be used for your glory to save others.” Believe that God can and will use your story to show someone else his love. Most importantly, be ready to share the gospel.

Sometimes we over complicate things. Remember Paul and Silas’s first response: “Believe in Jesus.” Start with that, friends. Tell someone about Jesus. Tell them that God created this world, created us. We were created to love and to be loved. However, every one of us chose at some point to turn away from God’s love. We decided we knew better than God, and look what a mess it has gotten our world into. Hatred, bitterness, war, suffering, pollution, mainly caused by the root of all sin: selfishness.

We have a choice. We can go on living in our self-constructed prisons, or we can follow the One who came to save us: Jesus. God sent his one and only Son into this world to show us true love, true selflessness, true peace. Even though he was innocent, Jesus was crucified on a terrible cross to bring us peace. And he rose again on the third day to prove that not even death can stop his love. The Bible promises that everyone who repents and believes in him as Lord and Savior will have eternal life. Those who trust in Jesus alone, like the jailer and his family, will be saved. And they will learn to minister to others the way that Jesus taught us, forgetting our own wants and desires, so that we can sacrificially love others. That is how we become his disciples. That is how Jesus saves the world, saves us.

If you are ready to become his disciple and leave your prison, I urge you to pray with me right now.

Memory Verse: Psalm 42:8

“By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me,

a prayer to the God of my life.”

Reflection Questions:

1. What do you consider to be your worst day ever? What was happening, and who was with you? Most importantly, was it your fault?
2. Why do we tend to shy away from pain and conflict? What does it take to have confidence and trust God in all circumstances?
3. Why do you think Paul and Silas prayed in spite of their pain? Why do you think they didn't run away when they had the chance?
4. Could you be that bold? Could you be that kind and loving, even to those who have hurt you?
5. When was the last time you talked about yourself and the struggles you are going through? When was the last time you told someone that God can use anything to bring glory to his name?
6. When was the last time you shared the gospel with someone else? Have you prayed for God to give you another opportunity?