

Believe in the Lord Jesus
Acts 16:16-34
May 5, 2024

In today's Scripture, Paul and his missionary team which included Silas, Timothy, and Luke, are in the city of Philippi. In obedience to a vision from God they had been guided there where they are experiencing success as evangelists. Since there was no synagogue in Philippi because the Jewish population was too small, they were headed south of the city along the bank of the Gangites River for prayer time with other believers. Along the way a young slave girl began to follow them around. She was a fortune teller. She was good at it and made a lot of money for her owners. Verse 17 tells us that as she followed Paul's team, she cried out: "These men are the servants of the Most-High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept it up for several days. Although that statement was true, the source of her power was the devil and the Lord didn't need his help! A partnership with the devil is the last thing God wants because it dresses evil like a wolf in sheep's clothing. Annoyed, Paul finally decided to do something about her pronouncements and turning to her he said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her." (Acts 16:18) At once the spirit left her. When the owners of the slave girl realized that their source of income was gone, they grabbed Paul and Silas. Eventually they were brought before the magistrates. The crowds joined with the girl's owners who said that these Jewish men were causing an upheaval by teaching things that were "unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." (Acts 16:21) Unlike Judaism, Christianity was not a legally approved religion by the Romans, therefore the magistrates ordered them stripped and beaten. Later they were beaten with rods, then thrown in prison. The jailer was commanded to watch them closely and so he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in stocks for added security and torture. To the jailer these were just two additional low-life prisoners to be treated with disdain like all the others. This is the first record we have of Paul in jail and he may have been wondering what he had gotten into.

Several years ago, my aunt Dorothy and I were eating breakfast at Randy's Diner in Traverse City. When we sat down in a booth there was a paper placemat under the plate, napkin, silverware etc. It was covered with advertisements from dozens of small businesses: body shops, pet groomers, income tax firms and on and on. One caught my eye because it was from Muskegon. It said that they were located on the corner of Pine Street and Apple Avenue, a very busy intersection which I have

passed hundreds of times. I lived only a few blocks from there as a kid and adult. I couldn't exactly remember the name of the business, so the next time I passed through the intersection I made a mental note. It was "Bad Boys Bail." On the paper place mat at Randy's was the slogan for these bondsmen, which I have never forgotten. It is perhaps my favorite: "If we can't get you out, you ain't gettin' out." Paul may have felt that way not knowing what lie ahead for he and Silas. But Paul did have one thing going for him: he did not know what the future held, but he knew who held the future.

In an experience the jailer and the other prisoners had most certainly never encountered before, we are told that around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God as the others listened. This was not the norm for prison living at midnight, but it was happening. The dark of a prison cell in the middle of the night was being brightened by the prayer and praise of believers. Perhaps this is not as unlikely to happen as we might think. For many it's true that they either come to faith or their faith grows during the darkest hours of their lives. Faith, which was perhaps quite dormant, can become alive during times of testing.

It was September 18, 1968 and Harold Morris sitting behind the wheel, was waiting for his friends who had gone to the supermarket a few minutes earlier. They came running down the street and yelled at him, "Drive! Drive! We just shot a man." (1) In the craziness of the moment he made the worst decision of his life as they jumped in and he hit the gas. They sped through Atlanta. Nearly a year later he was picked up in Greenville, South Carolina and charged with murder. It seems the man his ex-friend shot, died five minutes later. That was the first time he heard the news. After two hours in the county jail the FBI charged him with murder. Almost two years after the robbery and murder, he received a life sentence for each, although he never even robbed anyone and had no gun. I remember my mother saying many times "life isn't fair" and that seems kind of harsh, but then again, he was an accomplice. He was sent to the Georgia State Penitentiary and given prisoner number 62345. Nearly four years later he was visited by a high school friend, Clebe McClary and his wife Deanna. Clebe had been an all-state athlete turned evangelist who had been badly shot up as a U. S. Marine in Vietnam: one eye missing, two-thirds of his face reconstructed and a mechanical hook for a left arm. In his twisted right arm and hand, was a Bible which he gave to Harold. They prayed while Harold kept his eyes open so the other inmates would not know he was praying. Deanna handed Harold a cassette tape of Clebe's life and ministry and a list of Bible verses. She said that they and God loved him and they left. Later that night he opened a Bible for the first time and read the Bible verses she

had listed. In the dark of night on February 19, 1974 after years of bitterness and hatred he gave his life to the Lord at 3 a.m. on his knees in a dirty cockroach infested cell. A little over four years later with the support of many Christian friends, his family, and the work of the Lord in his life Harold was released from prison. On the day before he graduated from a four-year Bible College in three years, he received a full pardon from the state of Georgia. He went on to become an evangelist working mostly with young people encouraging them not to take the route he had taken. He had quite a message to share. Faith often comes in the darkest hours of our life.

As Paul and Silas were praying and singing praises to the Lord, a violent earthquake shook the foundations of the prison and the doors flew open and their chains came loose. The jailer awoke, and seeing the doors open, drew his sword to kill himself, because he thought the prisoners had escaped. (Acts 16:26-27) To have a prisoner escape meant that the life of the guard was demanded in the escapee's place. This was a moment of crisis for the jailer. Sometimes God uses crisis to break through the wall of indifference in the human heart.

In 1912, John Harper of Glasgow, Scotland was the newly called pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, so he headed to America with his 6-year-old daughter, Nina, and her Aunt Jessie. John's wife had died when Nina was born.

They were all excited to be on the maiden voyage of the greatest ocean liner ever built, -- the Titanic. When the ship hit the iceberg, Nina was saved in lifeboat number 11, sitting on her aunt's lap. Her daddy gave his lifejacket away, stayed with the ship, and began to witness to anybody who would listen. Pastor John was one of the 1,522 people who died that night.

Four years later, a man at a church meeting in Hamilton, Canada gave this testimony: "I am a survivor of the Titanic. When I was drifting alone on a spar that awful night, the tide brought Mr. Harper of Glasgow, also on a piece of the wreck, near me. 'Man,' he said, 'are you saved?' 'No,' I said, 'I am not.' He replied, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.'

The waves bore him away, but, strange to say, brought him back a little later, and he said, 'Are you saved now?' 'No,' I said, 'I cannot honestly say that I am.' He said again, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved!' Shortly after that he went down, and there, alone in the night, with two miles of water under me, I believed. . ." (2)

Often in order to save us, God touches us with a crisis and also with a Christian. Paul cried out from the darkness of his inner cell, "Don't harm yourself. We are all here!" (Acts 16:28) In the jailer's life it was Paul and Silas, for the young man of the

Titanic it was John Harper, for Harold Morris it was Clebe and Deanna McClary. Who touched your life for Christ? *Thank God for that person!*

The jailer's life changed in an instant from tragedy to triumph and he called for lights and rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He brought them out and asked the most important question of his life, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30) No longer low life prisoners, the jailer realized that they had something that he did not have. Realizing his need for salvation, he addressed them as "Sirs" and asked how he could be saved. They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." (Acts 16:31)

The jailer then took them to his house. They spoke about Jesus, his sacrificial death on the cross and his resurrection. How he died for them, that through faith in him they might be saved and have a relationship with God and his son Jesus Christ. The jailer washed their wounds and, "At that hour of the night...he and all his family were baptized." (Acts 16:33) Paul and Silas told those of the family late at night about Jesus. He and his whole household were filled with joy because they had come to believe in God.

But before you can tell people about Jesus - especially someone you don't know very well--you need to do two things: be obvious about who you belong to and make it obvious that you care for them as individuals. A young factory worker noticed one day that a valuable tool was missing from his toolbox. Later he recognized it in the toolbox of a fellow employee. The young man was the only Christian in the shop and he wanted to have a good testimony for Christ. So, he went home and prayed about the matter. The next day he went to the man and said, "I see you have one of my tools, but you may keep it if you need it." Then he went on with his work and put the incident out of his mind. During the next 2 weeks, the person who had taken the tool tried to soothe his conscience. First, he offered the young man something of equal value, then he offered to help him on some home projects, and finally he slipped some money into his coat pocket. Ultimately, they became friends, and the one-time tool thief started coming to church with his new Christian friend... and eventually made the decision to become a Christian. All because a Christian factory worker was willing to make it obvious; that he trusted God and show he cared. We are to do the same. Alleluia! Amen.

(1)Twice Pardoned Harold Morris p. 1

(2)Sermoncentral "Changed by Christ" Rick Crandall May 23, 2015 p. 2