



# THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY – THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

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## Believe in the Lord Jesus, and You Will Be Saved

### Acts 16:25-34 (NIV84)

<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. <sup>27</sup> The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" <sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup> They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." <sup>32</sup> Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. <sup>33</sup> At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. <sup>34</sup> The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.

The Apostle Paul has a checkered past. Before his conversion to Christianity, he actively sought out, hunted down, and arrested Christians and had them sent to death row. After Paul's conversion, there are moments during his ministry when you think that maybe he is getting a little bit of payback for what he did, or at least that he is experiencing firsthand the perspective of those Christians he hunted down. The events leading up to today's reading from Acts chapter 16 is one of those times.

Paul had received a vision from God to go and preach in the area of Macedonia. This led him to the city of Philippi. He had initial success as Lydia and her whole household were baptized that first Sabbath Paul preached there. As Paul continued ministering in Philippi, he soon encountered a slave girl "who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling." (Acts 16:16) This girl followed Paul around shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." (Acts 16:17)

There's that saying that there is no such thing as bad publicity, but a demon possessed girl, known for her interaction with black magic and fortune-telling, giving their Christ-centered message a stamp of approval is not good publicity. Jesus and the devil are enemies. They don't help each other out.

After days of this, Paul finally turned around to the girl and commanded the spirit to come out. It happened immediately, and the owners of the slave girl were furious! They just lost a significant source of income. So, they dragged Paul and Silas to a mob style trial bringing the charge that these men are "advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." (Acts 16:21) The crowd joins in, the keepers of the peace - the magistrates - order that Paul and Silas be stripped and beaten and thrown into prison without any semblance of a fair trial. After Paul and Silas are severely flogged, they are put in the inner cell of the prison and had their feet fastened in the stocks, probably for more torture.

It's midnight now of that same day. Paul and Silas are hurt, bruised, bloodied, and bound in chains. I would expect these two to simply have their heads hung low, maybe some whimpering or crying, but what are they doing? They "were praying and singing hymns to God." (verse 25) How could they be doing that? To have a will like that, a hope that even in the bleakest, dirtiest, darkest corner of a dungeon, I am going to sing hymns and pray to God, I don't know that I could do that. I would probably feel a little indignant that this all happened, a bit hurt by God that he is stopping my ministry in this way.

Yet, while Paul and Silas are praying and singing, "the other prisoners were listening to them." (verse 25) Not only do they have a hope to sustain them during this blatant injustice and humiliation and physical suffering, but they are taking this opportunity to share their faith and hope with the other dregs of society around them: the scoundrels, the scum, the villainy, the criminal lowlifes – all people who need the message that they have been preaching, to have the hope that they have even while in prison.

And then it happens. An earthquake shakes the very foundation of the prison. This is not a natural earthquake because it specifically caused all the prison doors to fly open and all the prisoner's chains to come loose. (verse 26) Here's their chance to escape from this injustice because God only knows what the jailer is going to do to Paul and Silas in the morning. But they don't leave. None of them do. I don't know how many seconds go by, but the earthquake has woken up the jailer. He rushes out, see the prison doors open, and immediately draws his sword to kill himself. That seems so severe, but, honestly, according to Roman law, that was what was going to happen to him if the prisoners had escaped under his watch.

Then comes Paul's shout: "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" (verse 28) This was enough to stop the jailer in his tracks. He calls for the lights and goes straight in to Paul and Silas and falls trembling before them. He's speechless. It's not computing. He brings Paul and Silas out of their cell and poses the only question that matters to him right now in light of this miraculous event, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (verse 30)

The answer is on the tip of our tongues. We want to share with him the salvation we know. We want to evangelize this jailer, say what Paul and Silas said. But before you jump right into answering the jailer's question, stop for a minute. We are sitting comfortably in church, enjoying a Sunday morning service. It's good that our God-given instinct would be to answer this question as quickly and simply as we can or to start thinking of Bible stories and verses to express what we believe. Now put yourself in the place of Paul and Silas. The wounds are so very fresh. Blood still runs down your back. Your arms and legs are cramped and strained as you have been sitting chained in the stocks. This jailer may have even been the one to have done the flogging and put you in the stocks. He has shown you no compassion, no forgiveness, no mercy. He would have been just fine seeing you rot in jail for the rest of your natural life.

If that is how that jailer treated you, what would you do the moment he comes to you on his knees trembling? Do you let him squirm a little? Do you make him apologize before you say anything else? Do you make him give you medical attention, a decent meal, pardon from the magistrate before you share with him the answer to that most important question, "What must I do to be saved?"

In our sense of justice, we want to see the antagonists of Christianity taken down a peg. When our God comes through for us, we want them to know that the faith they always made fun of and opposed has paid off. My God took care of me. Bow down to me; tremble before me, because this all-powerful God is my friend, and now he will bring some justice on you!

Yet a different justice, what we might see as an injustice, is presented to the jailer. Paul and Silas do not hesitate as they answer him, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." (verse 31) This is not a justice that says I need to have every wrong righted before I forgive people, before I am nice to people, before I share the Lord Jesus with them. This is a justice that carries out our punishment on someone else – on the Lord Jesus. He is innocent, yet he has taken our place. You can't do anything to save yourself, jailer, but the Lord Jesus did it all for you and your whole family.

This teaching that Paul and Silas gave, it wasn't a four month Bible class, like what our adult confirmands go through. This was a conversation that probably took less than an hour because we hear the immediate effects of the message. "At that hour of the night the jailer took [Paul and Silas] and washed their wounds." (verse 33) The jailer, by the work of the Holy Spirit, now recognized that Paul and Silas were thrown into prison, were flogged and beaten, because they told people that believing in the Lord Jesus saves you. The jailer couldn't undo what they had suffered, but out of deepest humility over this injustice that he helped carry out and knowing that the Lord Jesus had saved him, he washed their wounds.

Maybe it was that basin of bloodied, dirty water that led Paul and Silas to tell the jailer of another way that the Lord Jesus saves him and his whole household: baptism. You, jailer, have washed our wounds clean because you know that the Lord Jesus saves you. Now, let us wash clean your soul, that God would remove all the impurities and wounds that your sins inflict that keep you from being saved by God. "Immediately [the jailer] and all his family were baptized." (verse 33) They were adopted into God's family. Their sins – past, present with the unjust trial and the floggings and the prison time, and future – are all washed away. The jailer and his family were saved as the Holy Spirit caused them to believe in the Lord Jesus for their salvation given to them by baptism.

You may or may not have had a "What must I do to be saved?" moment. I did not make Kurt or Jennifer get down on their knees and ask that question before I was willing to teach them God's Word. What's true for the jailer and his family, is true for Kurt and Jennifer and for every single one of us. It was true for Paul and Silas. They had been washed. We have been washed. We don't deserve to be washed, to be saved, like the jailer and his household. That's not just. We should have to make amends with God, apologize for what we have done, pledge to do better, and maybe even beg a little. But the Lord Jesus changes all of that. He was washed for us to fulfill all righteousness. This was good and pleased God, his Father, our Father. Our Lord Jesus completed every commandment from God although we never could. The Lord Jesus substituted his life for ours, satisfying God's justice over our sins.

The only thing left to do is rejoice. "The jailer brought [Paul and Silas] into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family." (verse 34) They didn't have to beg. We don't have to beg or apologize or earn salvation from God. We have been washed clean of our sins just as the jailer and his family had been washed. We believe in the Lord Jesus by the work of the Holy Spirit, and we are saved. May we never hesitate to share the Lord Jesus with others so that they too are saved. Amen.