

### Baptism Gives Joy even in Pain

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

<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 everyone'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 household 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 household.

Feet fastened in stocks while in a dank, cold prison cell with no fresh air and no daylight. Bodies searing in pain. Muscles cramped, exhausted. Energy drained. Blood on their backs, some of it drying and sticking to their shirts, some of it still flowing from being flogged only hours ago. Surrounded by criminals, people that society did not want to see the light of day. How did we end up here?

This is not exactly a new situation for Paul and Silas, but it's also not a common occurrence for them either. They hadn't been in Philippi for very long. They had worshiped with people by the river just outside the city gate, preached to them, taught them, baptized them. The mission work was going well until a slave woman started following them around as they went to preach and teach. This was no ordinary slave; she had a spirit by which she predicted the future and earned her owners a great deal of money by doing it. She followed Paul and Silas and the other Christians around shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God." (Acts 16:17) Her behavior continued day after day until Paul became so fed up with her hindering their preaching and teaching that he commanded that spirit out of her in the name of Jesus Christ. That's what got them in prison.

The owners of the slave woman saw their income evaporate, and they became furious. They dragged Paul and Silas to the authorities, said that they were advocating customs unlawful for Romans to accept or practice. The crowd joined in the accusations. Mob mentality ruled that day. The magistrates ordered that Paul and Silas be stripped and beaten and thrown into prison.

If you were Paul or Silas after that whole ordeal, what would you be doing in your prison cell late that night? Would you be complaining about the injustice of it all? Would you talk about how much it hurts, how every inch of your back is burning with pain, how your muscles are cramping up, how you can't carry on with this kind of pain? Would you be sobbing at your hopeless situation? Would you curl up in a fetal position, trying to close your eyes as you wince through the waves of pain, wishing for it all to be over?

We may never have been in a prison cell for teaching people about Jesus, but we know pain. What do we do when we experience wave after wave of pain? Do we turn to complaining, to telling whoever will listen just how bad it is for us, talking about the injustice of our suffering, how we don't deserve this disease or ache or pain? Do we start to accuse God of not answering our prayers of taking away the pain, of bringing this upon us and undeservedly so? As the pain continues, do we express our hopelessness of getting through the pain, how we can't take much more of this, how we just want it to be over especially as God seems nowhere to be found and cares very little if any about our plight? Do we simply curl up in a fetal position and close our eyes, wincing at the pain while we wish for it to be over? We can understand these thoughts and feelings either because we've seen people at these breaking points of pain or because we've been there ourselves. We understand because we have been in that position where we are powerless to do anything to alleviate the pain. We get it if people wanting to die because they can't take the pain anymore.

But what did Paul and Silas do? After all that injustice, after all those punishments, having had their feet put into stocks in a dank, dingy, dark, and smelly inner cell, this is what they do: "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God." (verse 25) They are singing hymns! We can only imagine what hymns might have come to their minds and were on their lips, hymns maybe that we hold dear in times of unending pain and torment. Were they singing, "Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, Was blind but now I see." (CW 379:1) Did they sing, "And when I think that God, his Son not sparing, Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in, That on the cross my burden gladly bearing He bled and died to take away my sin. Then sings my soul, my Savior-God, to thee, 'How great thou art! How great thou art!'" (CW 256:3) Or "Abide with me; fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide. When other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me!" (CW 588:1)

Maybe Paul and Silas were singing some kind of baptismal hymn like ones we've sang already today while they recounted baptizing Lydia and her family, a woman they met at the river near Philippi, a family they shared Jesus with. Maybe they were recounting the joy of their own baptisms, thinking especially of Paul's when it came after he had received a vision from Jesus that turned his life completely around. Jesus turned Paul's life around in baptism. He was reborn, no longer a hater of Christians, but a Christian himself persecuted for his newfound beliefs as he preached Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, who takes away the sin of the world, who gives him joy even while in the midst of pain. Paul and Silas sang hymn because they rested secure knowing that their sins were forgiven and that they were accepted and loved as part of the family of God through their baptisms. How amazing it must have been for the other prisoners who heard Paul and Silas sing these hymns, to see them express joy even while in such miserable pain.

No matter how bad the pain gets in life, we have reason to sing joyful hymns to God because we know the joy of salvation, just like Paul and Silas. In baptism, God washed away our sins. He drowned our old sinful nature, the sinful nature we are born with, and by the work of the Holy Spirit connected with simple water we are spiritually reborn, a new creation. We were once dead in our trespasses and sins, as King David said, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." (Psalm 51:5) But we were washed. We were cleansed. We were clothed with Christ, his righteousness, his perfection. God saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Through our baptism, God gave us the forgiveness of sins, made us right with him, worthy of him, perfect before him. My baptism means that God accepts me, that God will rescue me from the pain of this world and deliver me to the unending peace and joy of heaven. This is the joy Paul and Silas had, joy so great that they could sing hymns to God while in so much pain. This is the joy of baptism that we have.

But the story's not over. "Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose." (verse 26) The jailer, peacefully at sleep, is jarred awake. He rushes out to assess the situation. With the cell doors open, there was only one conclusion to draw: the prisoners had escaped. Roman law required that if a prisoner escaped, the one in charge of them (the jailer) would face the punishment that was reserved for that prisoner. The jailer saw only one option open to him. "He drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped." (verse 27) This man reasoned that the impending pain was so great that it would be better to end his life.

But Paul and Silas knew otherwise. As Paul sees what is about to take place, as he sees the man who put his feet in stocks, who cared nothing for his wounds, who put him away in this inner cell so that he couldn't even get a glimmer of sunlight, Paul sees this man's pain. He shouts, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" (verse 28) The pain comes rushing out of the jailer as he falls trembling before Paul and Silas and asks, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (verse 30) In answer to the jailer's pain, Paul and Silas tell him, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. (verses 31-32)

Paul and Silas saw through their pain to the jailer's pain. They saw a man hurting with no certainty of salvation, no answer for how to get through this pain. This is why they shared with him Jesus, the one who saves. Do we see through our pain to the pain of others, especially with people who cause us pain? Do we remember our baptisms and the joy of salvation God gave us and look to share that joy even while we are in pain so that they too can have our joy? Do we see the person hurting who thinks that the best option is to take their own life? Do we see the person hurting as they wonder, "What must I do to be saved from my pain?"

We have the answer for people in pain. It's Jesus, just Jesus. Jesus was and is enough to save us, to give forgiveness of sins, to have accomplished everything needed to be right with God and live with him forever in heaven. This is even why Jesus, who is sinless, was baptized. He was baptized to fulfill all righteousness so that we could have that joy of salvation through this life and the next, so that this jailer could beam with joy that "he had come to believe in God – he and his whole household." (verse 34) They were all baptized by Paul and Silas. They were all family now, certain of their salvation. And the jailer showed his thankfulness by seeing Paul and Silas' pain, washing their wounds, giving them a meal. They all now had Jesus, and they were filled with joy overriding life's pain.

God makes dramatic events happen in people's lives so that their pain is exposed, particularly their pain of not knowing how they are saved. God also brings these people into our lives, people who are hurting, maybe hurting like us, maybe hurting so bad that they think, like the jailer, the best option is to end their lives. Like Paul and Silas, look past your pain and see theirs. Look past your pain with the joy you have knowing that you are a baptized, cleansed, accepted, loved child of God, even in the midst of life's pain. Answer that question that people have. Be the one who takes away the pain someone experiences not knowing what must be done to be saved. See through your pain to give them Jesus, the one who did everything so that we are saved. Share with them the joy and comfort of your baptism – your joy as a dearly loved, accepted, and cleansed child of God. Tell them that they can have this joy as well, a joy that will always be there for them even through the pain because of what our Savior has done what was needed to save us. Amen.