

Believe in the Lord Jesus

Acts 16:11–40

January 13, 2002

How in the world were Paul and Silas singing hymns at midnight while they were chained and locked in prison? What makes people do that? What makes people able to do that? What great joy was theirs? How can we find it for ourselves? How can we find it for this church? What is there that can give us that kind of foundation and that kind of courage for facing the adversities of our lives and the difficulties of the world? This is too good to pass by.

We are not the first to ask. Our questions now echo the jailer's question then. After the earthquake, when the doors were opened and the fetters were unfastened, when the jailer almost killed himself, but when his prisoners did not escape but stayed in jail, the jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" What can I do, what do I need to do, to find whatever it is that you have? You have something way beyond anything the Roman Empire ever gave me, or anything the Roman culture ever gave me, or anything the gods of Rome ever gave me. What is it? And they said to him, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

"Believe in the Lord Jesus." It sounds like a little thing, but it is everything. It sounds like a good thing to do, but it is beyond any good we can do. It is easy to say, but it is an all-encompassing, life changing, world changing turn around. "Believe in the Lord Jesus." There is the key to it all. There is the basis for faith. There is the basis for life. There is the basis for singing hymns at midnight, in chains and in prison. If you have this, you have everything. Is this of interest to you? Do you have it already? If so, are you willing to share it with others?

Who, then, in this Jesus? And how do we go about believing in him? Jesus is the Son of God. He is God incarnate, God in the flesh, God become human. He is the one without sin who took on all sin, all the sin of the world, including yours and mine. In fact, he died so that our sin might be forgiven. Then God raised him from the dead to vindicate his sacrifice and so that we, too, might live eternally. This is Jesus. And he is the Lord, the ruler of the universe and of our lives, whether we know it or not. He stands over against all the pretenders, all the would be lords of the universe or of our hearts, souls, and minds. The universe is not a democracy. Jesus does not need our vote to be Lord. But he is waiting for our faith, our trust, our loyalty, our acknowledgment of, and commitment to, his Lordship. This Jesus is the one Lord in whom we are to believe. Do you know him?

And how do we go about believing in him? At one level, this is an extremely personal act, an act of commitment, an act of trust and obedience. It is not unlike a pledge of allegiance by which we commit ourselves to him. In fact, it is not unlike a wedding vow, by which we promise to be faithful to him. "Believe in the Lord Jesus." This is something we can do. God does not mock us, asking us to do something we cannot do. This is something we can do. Have you done it? What are you waiting for? Or, have you helped anyone else see the light?

And yet, at the same time, we cannot simply believe in Jesus on our own. It is not an unaided human possibility. Something has to happen to make it possible for us to do this. As much as faith is a personal act, it is not simply a personal accomplishment. It is also a gift which we receive. Faith is something which is given to us. It is something which God works in us. The Lord opened Lydia's heart to give heed to what was said by Paul. Christ attracts our attention. He wins back our hearts and souls. He draws us to himself. The Holy Spirit works within us not only

to make it possible for us to believe but also actually to bring us to faith. And that continues to happen today.

Consider what happened in today's reading. There was an earthquake. The prison doors flew open. The fetters were unfastened. But Paul and Silas sat tight. How did they choose to stay in jail? It would seem that they would have left! It would seem that God had provided them the opportunity to get away, so that to stay was an act of ingratitude. But there was more to it than that. It was not simply that God offered them a chance to escape which they rejected. Instead, God offered them the reassurance that he could set them free any time he wanted to. God could and would take care of them. And that gave them the courage and strength to stay longer.

The truth is, they were fulfilling their calling, right there in prison. They had not done anything wrong or evil for which they were rightly sent to prison. Instead, they were there in prison by the design, purpose, leading, and calling of God. Somehow, they knew this. So, they stayed where God had put them. They stayed in prison for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They stayed in prison for the sake of evangelism, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. They stayed in prison because they had been called to Macedonia to preach the gospel, they had come to Philippi to preach the gospel, and this strange setting gave them an unusual opportunity to do just that. In short, they stayed in prison for the sake of the jailer. And it worked. It appears that he was the second convert to Christ in all of Europe. That is well worth of couple of midnight hymns.

Of course, this early prison ministry went beyond singing hymns. It is significant that their hymn singing, apparently, and their good example, convinced the other prisoners not to escape, either. But even more significantly, in their ministry to the jailer, "they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house." They taught him the word of God. They preached the gospel to him. They shared the good news of Jesus Christ with him. They put words with their actions, for without words, none of this would have happened. Without their witness, none of this would have happened. Without their preaching, without proclamation, without the ministry of the word, there would have been no faith, no conversion, no new Christians, no baptisms, and no new church in Philippi.

So that is what we as the church continue to do today. We speak the word of the Lord to you and to all who are in the sanctuary and to all who listen by way of radio. We speak the word of the Lord because we have been commanded to do so and because it is our high privilege to do so. We speak the word of the Lord because that is how the gift is given. That is how the Holy Spirit works within us. That is how faith is engendered. That is how lives are changed. That is how people's lives are turned around. That is how prisoners are set free. Is this of interest to you? Can you help us and give us the support we need to do this here and around the world?

The jailer was baptized, with all his family. His faith was not only an inner emotion. It was a new foundation for life, and it led to outward actions. He took on the signs of the community of the people of faith. He became a Christian. He joined the church. This was not optional. This was part and parcel of what Paul and Silas had to offer. So it is that we continue to call people into the church today. That is a big part of what the gospel is all about.

And the jailer rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God. They were happy. They were grateful. They were joyful. Paul probably taught them some hymns to sing. You see, they were saved. They were made new and whole. They were rescued from the reign of sin and from the depths of despair. Their lives were turned around. They were lifted out of the downward pull of the world and culture about them and set on the upward way to heaven. There

is nothing glum or gloomy about the Christian faith or about salvation. They have to do with a deep and abiding joy. Does that speak to your heart?

How in the world were Paul and Silas singing hymns at midnight while they were chained and locked in prison? What makes people do that? What makes people able to do that? What great joy was theirs? How can we find it for ourselves? How can we find it for this church? What is there that can give us that kind of foundation and that kind of courage for facing the adversities of our lives and the difficulties of the world? This is too good to pass by. Do we have the requisite faith in the Lord Jesus? Do we know well enough what our calling is, individually and as a church, so that we can fulfill it with that kind of confidence? Do we have the midnight, jail house, hymn singing joy that comes from knowing the gospel, knowing the Lord, and knowing that we are fulfilling God's calling for our lives? "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will saved."

*To God and to the Lord Jesus Christ be the glory
now and forever! Amen.*

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