

Philippian Jailer

My church just got a letter from Paul and it reminded me of that amazing night that changed my life forever. He is in prison again. People think he is a “trouble-maker.” He is! A righteous trouble-maker. And, incredibly, he sees prison as a good thing. He wrote, “What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.” Well it sure did for me!

Let me start at the beginning. I am a soldier and was posted to the prison at Philippi. Maybe boring but at least I was not exposed to battlefields. Some of the prisoners were potentially dangerous but they were behind bars. My family’s quarters were close enough to hear what was going on in the cells – not a nice place to raise children – but what we heard on that special night was amazing. It was not the cursing and threats of the average inmate but songs of praise to a God named Jesus.

Then there was a violent earthquake. Now we get occasional earthquakes but not only was this one unusually intense, but a most incredible thing happened. The chains fell off the prisoners and the gates all opened. I thought that the men in my cells must be magicians. I was terrified, partly because of the danger posed by the escaped prisoners themselves but even more by the reaction of my superiors.

The prisoners most likely would not stop to kill me in their rush for freedom but Roman law would not ignore me. I would be executed for dereliction of duty. And suicide was preferable to Roman execution, so that was my instinct.

Paul called out to me. He was actually concerned for my welfare and said, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here.” I got lights and rushed in, half expecting some sort of trick but desperate for hope. I said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

Now, of course, what I meant by that was, “Why should I not commit suicide?” Roman justice needs a scapegoat for any mishap. But Paul answered a far bigger question. Actually, it was the question that had long smoldered deep in my heart, “What is life all about?” He proceeded to answer it by telling me about Jesus.

What a strange story, a miraculous earthquake, the prisoner takes pity on the jailer who becomes a Christian along with his whole family. The magistrates arrived in the morning to release Paul and Silas. Paul had hubris! He did not take the narrow window of opportunity to get out of town – after all, they could change their mind. Instead he boldly called attention to the fact that he and his companion were Roman citizens and had been flogged without a trial.

That is probably what led to my getting off the hook because they did not want their own part in the messy affair publicized. Anyway, after Paul left, I found other believers. Lydia’s home was a meeting place. She asked me to share my story. The church grew. I am now an elder and I talk to my prisoners about Jesus and pray that their chains will fall off – spiritual for sure, and physical, unless “what has happened to *them* has really served to advance the gospel.”

Acts 16:12-40, Philippians 1:12 - 26