



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“One Powerful Song”

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Acts 16:23-34

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Paul, once the archenemy of the early Christian movement, has become its chief evangelist. After preaching and planting churches in Cyprus and Galatia, he returned to Jerusalem to argue successfully for the full inclusion of Gentiles into the faith. With his new partner Silas, he traveled through modern day Syria and Turkey before arriving in Philippi. They were warmly received as they shared the Gospel – that is, until their healing of a fortune-telling slave woman cut off the exploitive income of some of the citizens. They were dragged before the civil authorities, stripped, beaten, and thrown in jail, which is where we find them in our scripture lesson for today.

Behind bars, bruised and bleeding, their feet chained to the stone floor, Paul and Silas began to pray and sing. Sometimes, when things are really bad, all you can do is sing. “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.” “I want Jesus to walk with me.” But these weren’t songs of lament. They sang songs of praise. Why? Because they put their trust in God who raised Jesus from the dead and whose presence guided every moment of their lives. The other prisoners listened – not for entertainment or distraction, but because they were enthralled. How could these men keep singing when they were in this dismal, hopeless place? The sound of their voices lifted the spirits of those imprisoned with them.

Suddenly, an earthquake sent everything into motion. The bars shook loose of their foundations, the chains broke free from their moorings and fell from their ankles. Not only were Paul and Silas unchained, but everyone else in the jail with them. The jailer, knowing what fate awaited him if his prisoners escaped, drew his sword and was about to take his own life. But Paul called out to him: “Don’t harm yourself. We are all still here. No one has escaped.”

The jailer was astounded. Why hadn’t the prisoners taken advantage of the chaos? Why didn’t they make a break for it? What would make these men stay behind, surrendering their chance at freedom? And why were they concerned about their jailer’s well-being? At the very moment they were set free, they chose to save the life of the one who held them captive.

In a moment of both irony and clarity, the jailer escorted Paul and Silas outside and asked them, “What must I do to be saved?”

“Believe in Jesus, you and everyone in your household.”

Paul and Silas began to share the Gospel with him and with his family. The jailer washed their wounds and gave them clean clothing to wear. Paul and Silas baptized the man and everyone living in his house that very night. They shared a meal together and the entire household came to faith in Christ because of the witness of Paul and Silas.

Like so many of the stories found in Acts, this is an amazing adventure with surprising twists and turns. What looked like the end of the road in Philippi for Paul and Silas turned into a time of profound witness and proclamation. An earthquake that offered a chance to be saved from incarceration and judgment led to the spiritual salvation of the jailer and his entire household, not to mention how it altered the lives of the prisoners who witnessed the moment. Paul and Silas went from zeros to heroes literally overnight. Talk about living the Spirit life!

There are many lessons we can learn from this story, but I want to lift up three of them for us today:

Faith isn’t just about ourselves, it’s about who we bring along with us. Paul and Silas offered encouragement to their fellow prisoners through song and prayer; the prisoners in turn trusted them and stayed where they were even after their bonds were broken. The faithfulness of Paul and Silas and their trust in God saved them, but they knew it wasn’t just for them. Their faith led to the opportunity for the jailer and his household to be saved, too. The jailer washed their wounds; Paul and Silas baptized him and his family, “washing” them from sin and into the community of Christ.

Salvation isn’t just individual, but communal. It is personal, but it’s more than personal. Jesus came so that *all* might be saved, not just some of us. The Gospel is Good News for everyone or it isn’t good news at all.

Our witness matters. Imagine if Paul and Silas had become despondent at their imprisonment or if they’d just prayed in silence and stuck to themselves. If they had never sung, what would have happened to the other prisoners? Or

if they'd taken advantage of the earthquake and fled, what would have become of the jailer? We can imagine a different outcome. The prisoners likely would have been rounded up and imprisoned again, but who knows what would have happened to them and those around them in the meantime. (I can promise you they weren't all in prison for preaching on the street.) The jailer would have succeeded in his attempt to take his own life, leaving his family destitute. And Paul and Silas would have become outlaws. We learn later that they shouldn't have been imprisoned to begin with because they were Roman citizens. But dropping charges from a minor misunderstanding becomes complicated when adding the infraction of escaping from prison.

None of that happened because Paul and Silas knew that their witness mattered. Their faith was evident while they were suffering and in chains, drawing those around them to want to have that kind of faith, too. Their steadfastness and concern for the jailer helped him to see another way of life than enforcement of laws by threat of violence. They not only saved his life but brought him and his family to faith in Jesus. We don't know their stories, but the prisoners witnessed the power of the Spirit that night, too. How were their lives changed? Who did they tell about that story, and how many lives were changed because of the Gospel?

A song can change everything. Luke doesn't say that the singing caused the earthquake in Philippi, but we infer from his telling that the two were related. We don't know what song they sang, but we imagine it must have been some song to have captivated the other prisoners and to shake the very foundations of the prison itself.

Can a song really have that much impact? The long-held legend of operatic sopranos breaking glass with her stratospheric tones turns out to be more fiction than fact, as evidenced by the popular Discovery Network show *MythBusters*.¹ It seems apparent that two guys singing a hymn in a prison aren't likely to literally cause an earthquake.

But there are other ways to have earth-shattering impact. Billie Holiday's 1939 "Strange Fruit" may be one of the most damning social commentaries ever set to music. The disturbing lyrics and haunting melody depict the horrors of lynchings that plagued the Jim Crow South in the first half of the 20th century. The British music scene publication *Q* called it a song "that actually changed the world."² Many people knew about the violence toward Black people in the deep south, but it wasn't talked about openly. Some did not know, or did not want to know. But "Strange Fruit" brought the conversation to the mainstream, at least in those venues that would allow Holiday to sing it. Marvin Gaye's 1971 hit "What's Going On" carried feelings about the war in Vietnam, police brutality, race relations, and the strangling grip of unemployment to the streets of Detroit and the radio waves of America. U2's "Sunday Bloody Sunday" became the anthem exposing the futility of violence in Northern Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s.

You probably can name other songs that awakened your consciousness or changed the way you looked at the world. Songs can fundamentally shape our own identity – the anthems of our youth or songs associated with a particular moment in time. Many of the hymns of our tradition have incredible stories behind them, like "Amazing Grace" and "It Is Well with My Soul." I know from conversations with some of you that particular hymns have made your faith real and personal and hold special meaning for you. Some hymns carry me back to my childhood faith, others hold significance for later moments on my journey. The hymn, "I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath" always catches in my throat – if any of you are around for it, I want you to sing that at my funeral. Music holds power to do what words alone cannot.

Of course, it wasn't the singing itself that rocked the foundations of the Philippian prison. That was the work of the Holy Spirit. But that's not to say that the song and the Spirit weren't connected. Paul and Silas were willing vessels, conduits for the work of the Spirit. Their song set the stage for the dramatic sequence of events that unleashed the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives and history itself. This was the Christian community to which Paul would later write such treasured lines as "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," and "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice!" and "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord," and "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Long before a tune ever crossed their lips, Paul and Silas sang with their lives. Their actions and their ministry bore witness to the Spirit Life that bubbled up through them. As 19th century poet Amy Lowell wrote:

*'Tis you that are the music, not your song,
The song is but a door which, opening wide,
Lets forth the pent-up melody inside,*

¹ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/fact-or-fiction-opera-singer-can-shatter-glass/>

² https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/m/margolick-fruit.html?TB_iframe=true&height=921.6&width=921.6

*Your spirit's harmony, which clear and strong
Sing but of you.*

Their lives sang not of themselves, but of the God who brought them to life, the Risen Christ who redeemed them, and the Holy Spirit that empowered them to lay the foundations for the church we still inhabit and embody today. And because they sang their song – both figuratively and literally – that song reverberated throughout the prison, throughout the fledgling Christian community, and throughout the ages. And on it goes, passing the tune to us and to those who will come after us.

Each one of us has, planted within us, a life song, a gift of our Creator. Your song can bring healing for those in pain, hope for the despairing, encouragement for those struggling to find their way, inspiration for those in need of direction. Each song is beautiful in its own right, a song without which the world is incomplete. But when we unite our voices and sing as one, that song can change the world, because it's the song the of the Holy Spirit, the music of heaven itself.

Faith is deeply personal – Christ wants to know us and be known by us intimately. But our faith must go beyond ourselves to include those around us and see the divine image in them, too. Our witness matters; not just the words we share, but the faith we live, reflecting the love of God to those for whom the only Christ they know may be the Christ they see in us. And never underestimate your part in God's story. God has given you a song to sing. It may be but a simple song, but even a simple song can change everything. What song will your life sing?