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The National Presbyterian Church

# Good News for Three Men in Jail

Acts 16:9-40

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Today, we're in the midst of a series of sermons on the early church and the cities they loved. We've been tracking Saint Paul in the Book of Acts, as he moves throughout his ministry city by city. Last week, we were in Lystra, which is in the Roman province of Asia, which is today modern-day Turkey. In that city, he also found a young man who will travel with him for the rest of his career, Timothy, who is a young Greek whose mother is Jewish as is his grandmother. They raised him. His father was Greek. Timothy becomes a Christian believer and follows Paul.

The city that we will see today is a small one by first century standards. It's actually called a colony, a Roman colony, which means it was not a free city like Athens or Corinth or Ephesus each of which had free city status. A colony city is very much under the control of the Roman military. It's a colony city where a lot of troops are kept because of the Roman road that leads up by Philippi and heads toward Asia. And it is the first city in Europe that Paul enters. The first converts to Christian faith in Paul's ministry happened in this city, so it's very important for us. Paul writes a letter to the people of this city, the Letter to the Philippians later in his life. But now let's look at Paul and Philippians from the 16th chapter of Acts.

Let's pray first, though. Lord, may the words of my mouth, the meditations of our heart be acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Teach us, Lord, from this amazing text as we watch Paul and his friends in their ministry as they enter Europe. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

If you open up to the 16th chapter of Acts, Paul and his friends are at Troas. We can tell from this text, there are probably three people traveling with Paul: Silas, Timothy, and the beloved physician Luke. We meet them in Troas after they have just been at Lystra. They come down to Troas, and here's what happens at Troas. Verse 10: "Paul had a vision, a vision appeared to Paul in the night. And a man of Macedonia," that would be the Roman province of Macedonia across the water which is modern-day Greece, "A man from Macedonia said, 'Come over and help us.' And when he had seen the vision immediately, we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the Gospel to them." We really shouldn't talk about the missionary journeys of Saint Paul. We should talk about the missionary journeys of Paul and his friends, Paul and his teammates.

We felt the call to go. And by the way, this is a famous text in the interpretation of the New Testament because this is the beginning of the "we" passages in the Book of Acts. And from the "we" passages, we're able to figure out that this is an autograph from Saint Luke who is the author of the Book of Luke and the Book of Acts; because from this point on, if you track everything Paul does and figure who's with him, the one person who's not named is the person who is the beloved physician that Paul knows and travels with. So this is the beginning of Luke's autograph as the author of the book. "So setting sail therefore from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace and then the following day to Neapolis," that's on the coast of Greece, "and from there to Philippi," which is a leading city in the district, he's paying it a compliment, a Roman colony. But he has to tell the truth. It's just a Roman colony. He calls it a leading city, but really it's not a free city like Athens or Corinth or the others. "We remained in the city for some days.

And on the Sabbath day, we went outside the gate to the riverside where we supposed there was a place of prayer." Notice he doesn't say we went to the synagogue. There is no synagogue in the city. In Jewish tradition, it takes ten males to form a synagogue, and if they don't have the ten males, they can't form a synagogue. And all over the Mediterranean world of the first century, there are synagogues in every city, but not in this little town; and so instead, there's a place of prayer. Paul supposed that there would be a place of prayer where pious people, who wanted to worship *Yahweh*, who want to worship God and honor the *Torah* and the prophets, would be. And so they supposed it would be by this river. So that's what happens here. "So on the Sabbath day, we went outside the gate to the riverside where we supposed there would be a place of prayer. And we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. And one who heard us was a woman named Lydia." The first convert in Europe is this businesswoman who's a Greek. She's from Thyatira, which is present-day Turkey, and she was a seller of purple goods, we're told. That means that she's a businesswoman selling

these fabrics to wealthy people, because the colored fabrics go to wealthy people; the white bleached fabrics are used for slaves and used for ordinary people. So she's a seller of purple goods. "A woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods. And she was a worshipper of God." Again, a technical phrase. Luke uses that phrase to refer to Greeks who were fascinated with Jewish monotheism. Perhaps they were disillusioned with all of the chaos of the Greek mythic mystery cult religions built around the Greek gods, and then the Romans of course who had borrowed the Greek gods.

Every city had temples and virtually all the emperors had temples built for them. So it was so chaotic that many Greeks then became fascinated with the purity of Jewish monotheism. And they would come to the synagogue, or in this case the place of worship, and they would listen to the *Torah*, the law, and the prophets being read and the Psalms, and they were impressed. And to these people Paul often had great success in preaching. So she was a worshipper of God. "The Lord opened her heart to hear and give heed to what was said by Paul." I love that phrase, this is the ministry of the Holy Spirit helping to make her ready to hear what Paul was saying. "And when she was baptized with her household, she besought us saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.'" And then Luke puts this line in, "And she prevailed upon us." Did you know the strongest word in Greek persuasive language is used here?

It could be translated, "She forced us to stay there." Translators decided to soften it and said "she prevailed upon us to stay there." Do you realize the Jewish protocols that are being tampered with by Saint Paul and his friends? A Jewish man spending a night in a woman's house and in a Greek woman's house. Paul and Silas were both Jews, Timothy and Luke were both Greeks, they wouldn't care, but they're in this Greek woman's house. And so I wonder if Luke puts it and states, "She forced us to do it," so that when Jewish readers read the Book of Acts they wouldn't be too offended at Paul. After all, Peter also went in Cornelius' house and now Paul, but that was a man. Now Saint Paul is going into this woman's house, Lydia, and that's the first beginning of the church of Philippi. This woman's house, Lydia, a businesswoman, and her family who become believers. So we went to the house, and Luke says "She prevailed upon us." She forced us to come. We just had to do it because she said if I have faith in the Lord, you have to do it. "So as we were going to the place of prayer," this is the next verse, "we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination." Our English text uses the word "divination" here to translate the Greek word *pythius*.

It's the word *pythius* that's used here. It's a Greek word for "python, snake." And if she had the spirit of the python, spirit of *pythius*, then Luke is giving you a clue that this woman is probably an oracle from Delphi. If any of you have been to Greece and have gone to Athens,

north of Athens is the little city of Delphi. It's a major tourist city today. And if you go there, they'll show you the sulfur spring where the oracles of Delphi did their fortune-telling. It was actually a sulfur spring, and it had fumes, but they had created a myth that there was a python down in the pit, and they would breathe the fumes. But we know that the oracles of Delphi also used laurel bark, which is a narcotic, so many of them were in a trance. They were in a narcotic trance. So probably a lot of them were drug addicts because they were slaves being kept in--continually put into these trances. It's like using LSD which puts you into a trance. And they would breathe the fumes, and then they would tell fortunes.

They would sometimes have hallucinations or convulsions and would then tell fortunes. They were very famous. Generals came from all around the Roman world to have their fortunes told by the oracles of Delphi. And the oracles were noted for offering double-edged fortunes. They would always tell you a fortune that could go either way. For instance, a general would say, "I'm going to battle now," and the oracle would say, "You will not be defeated in battle by any man naturally born." And then a man born by Caesarean section ends up defeating them. And so she won both ways. He was comforted for a while until he was finally defeated. And now some of those slaves that were used that way were taken evidently around by their owners to tell fortunes in other places, and that is what this woman is. Now listen to the text. "So we were going to the place of prayer. We met a slave girl who had a spirit of pythius," divination, "and she brought her owners much gain by soothsaying. She followed Paul and us crying, "These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaimed to you the way of salvation." She's telling the truth. That is amazing. She's telling the truth. The only problem is she won't stop telling it day-after-day-after-day, so there's a kind of chaos in it.

So notice what happens next. "She followed Paul and us crying, 'These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation.' And this she did for many days. But Paul--" you know, I love Luke. Luke is so matter-of-fact. He's not a propagandist. He doesn't say, "But Paul moved by compassion." No. Paul was annoyed. And Luke calls it the way it was. But even though the truth is being told, it's being told chaotically, and Paul didn't want it chaotically told. It's like sometimes somebody will say, "Praise the Lord," and say it maybe three times and it's very touching. But then they say it maybe 30 times and you're wondering, you think, "Let's not protest it too loud." It's too much. Three times would be enough. The Lord can hear. Twenty times, it's now becoming dangerous. And so Paul silenced her. He cast out the demon. There was a demon that was causing this.

So listen to the text again. "Paul was annoyed because it was happening over and over again. And so he turned and said to the spirit, 'I charge you, in the name of Jesus Christ, come out of her,' and it came out of her that very hour. But when her owner saw that their hope of gain was gone," now she has her sanity back, "when their hope of gain was gone, they seized



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Paul and Silas." I thought I told you there were people there: Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy. Why don't they seize Luke and Timothy? In a minute, you'll see why. "They seized Paul and Silas. They dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers, and then they brought them to the magistrates and they said, 'These men are Jews!'" There's the key. It is an example of first century prejudice against the Jews. It was widespread throughout the Roman Empire. "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city." Actually Paul calmed the city when this woman stopped shouting all the time. They advocate customs which is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice. The crowd joined in attacking them. Paul's getting used to this; it happened at Lystra, too. And the magistrates tore the garments off of them and gave orders to beat them with rods. I have to tell you about Roman punishments. The worst of all Roman punishment was crucifixion, of course, which could only happen for a non-Roman citizen. It only happened for slaves and criminals. The other punishment being flogged which kills some people, again, only a non-Roman citizen is the only one that could be flogged, or slaves or criminals.

And then rods, being beaten with rods; it's not as bad as flogging but it's terrible. By the way, the rods were a lictor, a lictor which is bound with a sleeve at the bottom and a sleeve at the top and then a symbol of an axe on the top. It's the symbol of Roman justice, power restrained by law. That is the reason for the sleeve at the bottom. But when you take the sleeve off, then that's the condemnation, and then you would beat a man with those rods and would make his back just like ribbon. It's terrible punishment. Isn't it interesting that the House of the Representatives of the United States Congress has behind the speaker's seat two lictors, these symbols of Roman justice--the rods bound in the bottom and the top with the axe, power under restraint, restrained by law. That sleeve is removed and these two men are beaten with rods. In fact, Luke, who never overstates, Luke said, "And then when they inflicted many blows on them, they threw them into prison and charging the jailer to keep them safely.

And having received this charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in stocks." That's a big bar, a wood bar that the chains go under the bar and the person's held. "But about midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God." This is a moving sentence, and we're going to hear an anthem sung by our choir, "Song at Midnight." It will be so touching during our time of Communion. When I read Victor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning*,<sup>1</sup> he tells about being thrown into a Nazi prison camp as a Jewish person during World War II. And when they put him into prison camp, they took his wedding ring off his hands, they took all the gold, the jewelry that he had, and then they put him into prison. And Victor Frankl said to his guards, "You can do this to me but I get to decide how I feel about it. You can't tell how I feel. You can't make me feel what you want me to feel. I'll feel what I'm going to feel." And Victor Frankl said that's what kept his sanity. He got to de-

ride that. And notice Paul and Silas do that. They're beaten and very badly beaten and they're singing hymns. They decided to sing songs to focus their eyes on Christ. It's very moving. We don't know what they sang; it would be wonderful to know the hymn they sang. They were singing hymns to God.

The prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly, there was a great earthquake. Now this is earthquake country, so that's not necessarily surprising. Greece is highly earthquake. And there was a great earthquake. So the foundations of the prison were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's tethers were loosened. Because when an earthquake happens, all the doorjams go askew and that bar that was holding these men would have gone askew and now the chains would be loose. What a moment! And all the doors were opened. Tethers were unfastened. The jailer woke and saw the prison doors were open. He drew his sword and was about to kill himself supposing that the prisoners have escaped. And in Roman law, if a guard loses his prisoners, his life is forfeited but probably with torture. And so, he wants to make sure that doesn't happen and he's going to commit suicide. He's taking his sword to kill himself.

And now listen, but Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself. We're all here." And he called for lights and rushed in--that would be the guard. And the guard trembling with fear fell down before Paul and Silas and brought them out and said, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" By the way the word saved is not a religious word in the first century. *Soter* just means "to be made safe," becomes the word for peace too. "What do I have to do to be like you guys? I wouldn't have done this, what do I need to do?" And then Paul spoke simply and directly, just like he did to Lydia at the riverside. He said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your family, your household." He didn't say join my church. He didn't say be sure you contribute to my cause. He didn't say here are the things you need to embrace. Just one, one thing, trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. That centered-ness of Paul's message that won the people at Antioch and won Lydia at the river, now wins this guard. And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house. The guard now evidently takes him to his house. And that hour, they washed his wounds, and he was baptized at once with all his family. And then he brought them up into his house, he set food before them, and he rejoiced with his household that he had believed in God. But when it was day, now, Paul's back in prison, the guard brought him back now that he's been washed up.

And the magistrate sent the police saying, "Let these men go." And the jailer reported the words to Paul saying, "The magistrate has sent to let you go. Now, therefore, come out and go in peace." But Paul said to them--now I love this next line, talk about skating on thin ice. Listen to what Paul says, "They have beaten us publicly and condemned men who are Roman citizens, and they have thrown us into prison and they do now--now, they want to secretly

send us out? No, let them come themselves and take us out.” You know what Paul is doing here? He’s not only content to be a man of evangelism; he’s going to be a man of social justice too. And the social justice mandated the Christian gospel comes right to here. Paul wants it spread on the record that something unjust has happened. He’s not satisfied just to have won the Philippian jailer. He now wants to put in the record that something wrong and un-righteous has happened; he wants it on the record. And from that moment on, the Christian gospel has always been a gospel of the peace of salvation and the peace of social justice.

They come together. He cares about that, and he--notice how dangerous it would be for him to say this-- the police reported these words to the magistrate. They were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. And so they came and apologized to them, and they took them out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison, they visited Lydia there again, and when they had seen the brethren--that would include the jailer’s household now--they exhorted them and departed. Folks, that’s the beginning of the Philippian church. Little wonder Paul loved that church so much and sent one of the best letters he ever wrote to the Philippians. I want you to notice that some important things happened here. First, a clear statement about who Christ is, it won the Greeks at the river and it won this prison guard. The clarity, the simplicity of the message of Saint Paul is right here. Second, there is the rescue event of the earthquake. By the way, it’s a little bit like Peter’s rescue. Remember in chapter 12 of Acts, Peter was thrown in a prison by Herod, and he was put in between two guards, chained to two guards. And in the middle of the night, an angel appeared to Peter saying, “Peter, Peter, come with me.” And then, he was unchained miraculously from the two guards, and Peter and the angel walked right out, got right out of the prison, right past everybody that was asleep. Talk about an event. Looks like Obi Wan Kenobi taking Luke Skywalker in “Star Wars,” remember? Right by these guards, it’s like magic.

It was an amazing event. Peter goes through the street, remember, and the Christians were all in house praying for Peter’s release. He goes and knocks on the door. And then a girl comes to the door, she looks out and said, “Oh, it’s Peter,” but she keeps the door closed. It’s one of the funniest scenes in the New Testament. And he’s standing there in the street, and then--by the way, she gets her name in the New Testament for this, Rhoda. The girl wouldn’t open the door for Peter and then Peter came in. You know, Paul knows about that event. I often thought about this event. Paul and Silas beaten up, in the middle of the night they’re singing hymns, and then an earthquake from the Lord and the guard’s asleep. Wow, how fortuitous. We can go right by that guard, we can go over to Lydia’s house, and everybody will rejoice, and we will be in daily Vacation Bible School stories like Peter will be and all this for the rest of time.



They'll write hymns about this. Wow. But, you know, the big event is not Paul's escape. The big event here is what this text tells us about. And that is two beaten-up men, Silas and Paul, waiting for a guard to wake up. Knowing that when the guard wakes up, he will kill himself, and they are determined to save his life. That's why I titled this sermon "Good News for Three Men in Prison." When the guard is about to kill himself and we discovered that guard has a family, maybe a big family, and just about the time he's to kill himself, Paul says, "Don't harm yourself. We're here." And that does the guard in. He experienced the love of Christ through these two men. That's the big event. What an event. It starts the Philippian church. Catherine of Siena was a Roman Catholic nun and saint who lived in the 14th century, and she wrote her dialogues. And in the dialogues that Catherine of Siena wrote, she tells of a conversation that she had with the Lord. And in this dialogue, the Lord is speaking to Catherine of Siena. The Lord says to her, "I ask you to love me with the same love with which I love you. But for me, you cannot do this, for I love you without being loved. Whatever love you have for me, you owe me. So you love me not gratuitously but out of duty, while I love you not out of duty but gratuitously.

So you cannot give me the kind of love I ask of you, and this is why I have put you among your neighbors so that you can do for them what you cannot do for me. That is, love them without any concern for thanks and without looking for any profit for yourself." And then she puts this last line in. The Lord says to her, "And whatever you do for them, I will consider it done for me." Paul and Silas wait for a guard to wake up and share a love for him which they experienced when Jesus Christ died for them. We're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper and receive that gift of his love for us. And our prayer is that that love will flow through us. Heavenly Father, thank you for that. Thank you for Paul and Silas. Thank you that they were able to wait for a guard and then to share your love for him. Thank you that's the way the Philippian church starts. May that be the mark of every Christian church. May that love be what sets us apart so that people will know that we've been loved and, therefore, we can love.

<sup>1</sup>Frankl, Victor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1984.

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*Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.*  
*Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.*

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