

Dignifying Grace

Acts 16:25-40

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, **26** and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. **27** When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. **28** But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." **29** And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. **30** Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" **31** And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." **32** And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. **33** And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. **34** Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

35 But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." **36** And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace." **37** But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out." **38** The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. **39** So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. **40** So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.

Sermon Notes

An institution I was once associated with years ago was in a capital campaign and made a connection with some industry titans in Detroit. The president of the institution, some high-level staff, and board members flew to Detroit to lay out their vision and monetary ask. At the conclusion of their presentation one of the executives of a major automaker asked the president how much money he was trying to raise. The president gulped and said, "Five million dollars," a sum he considered sizable for his small institution. The executive harrumphed and said, "This was a waste of my time! I thought you were asking me to join something truly significant. I want to be a part of something bigger than what I could entirely fund myself!" It was a humiliating experience for my friends to be dismissed because they had asked for too little.

While God does not treat us that way, Jesus does command us to ask and expect great things from his Father. He provides stories of God's mighty acts like this miracle in the life of the Philippian jailer to expand our expectations for our own lives. In C.S. Lewis' famous sermon, "The Weight of Glory," he expresses this idea:

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. (26)

We do expect too little from the gospel! Our text demonstrates that if we want to live remarkable lives for Christ, we must believe the gospel is powerful to produce transcendent lives, transformed leaders, and is truly simple.

I. Transcendent Lives

While this jailer had apparent power because of his sword, it is the faith of Paul and Silas which is revealed to be truly powerful. Neither their bonds nor their physical pain could arrest their joy in having a personal relationship with a gracious Lord. The unbelievers' confidence is revealed to be a façade by changes in circumstances. Open prison doors move the jailer from a bullying confidence to suicidal thoughts. The revelation Paul and Silas are Roman citizens and thus have a basis to file a grievance over their flogging with superior authorities brings even these arrogant magistrates to their knees. When Christ grants us faith he provides us a basis for living freely from all fears. In his mercy he grants that same transcendent faith to the jailer.

A. First Miracle: Earthquakes were common around Philippi, illustrating God usually works through the apparently ordinary to accomplish the extraordinary. The earthquake would have shaken the bars loose on the doors and collapsed the walls to which the chains were affixed. As post-Enlightenment Americans we focus on the miracle of the earthquake opening prison doors for Paul and Silas. It was a miracle in terms of its precise timing and location. However, to focus only on the jailbreak would be to miss the greater miracles. The earthquake was sent primarily for the jailer was in a prison house of sin and unbelief, not Paul and Silas. They were characteristically hopeful. Just as Paul slept peacefully the night before his trial (12:6), he and Silas are singing hymns in their cells. Their confidence in God's sovereign plan to redeem the world and protect their souls in the next life freed them to behave counterintuitively. They expected God to do surprising works of redemption, so they always took the most surprising road when faced with a choice. They knew that God was in the habit of getting unbelievers' attention by doing the remarkable, so they determined to act remarkably every time there was a choice between ordinary and remarkable. Run for cover or stand and preach—they chose to preach. Hang on to your money because you don't know what the future holds or give sacrificially—they chose to give away what they had so they could watch God provide. Hold grudges or forgive—they forgave even while being stoned. Now they are faced with another such choice. They can escape from the jail or they can stay and dumbfound the jailer with their care for his body, his family, and his soul. That is one of the greatest miracles in the text. These two men acted counterintuitively—who would not run for his life from a brutal Roman prison? They also acted counterculturally—what Jew oppressed as he had been by Romans would not have delighted in watching a jailer kill himself? However, in order to prove the transforming power of the gospel, Paul and Silas stayed and intervened, begging the jailer not to kill himself.

B. Second Miracle: The next miracle is the man's conversion. Notice Luke never mentions the jailer's astonishment at the earthquake. He most likely thought this was just another quake he had become accustomed to. What ultimately provokes him to ask, "What must I do to be saved?" is seeing Paul and Silas remaining in their cell. He didn't bother to check the cells for prisoners after he saw the doors were opened before he drew his sword to kill himself, because there would be no reason to think any prisoner would voluntarily remain behind. Roman law specified a guard who allowed the escape of a prisoner was to bear the same penalty the escapee would have suffered (Roman Code of Justinian 9.4.4). That is why Herod executed the guards after Peter's angelic release from prison (Ac. 12:19). The jailer's inference Paul and Silas would be executed makes their joyful worship in the cell even more remarkable. So when the jailer hears Paul shout, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" he was startled. It was their presence that caused him to fall

trembling at their feet, despite the fact he was surrounded by those he had commanded to hold lanterns, and ask how he could become a follower of Jesus. His conversion observed by these witnesses could get him executed, however, the transcendental reality of two men remaining in prison out of love for his life trumped his fear of death at the hands of Romans. Considering just moments before he preferred to kill himself than die brutally at the hands of his Roman superiors, his conversion to Christ is truly miraculous because now he shows no such fear. He had instantly been converted into someone as countercultural as Paul and Silas.

The gospel gives us power to make remarkable choices. When the choice is to be recluses or hosts, we can choose to practice what Rosaria Butterfield calls “radically ordinary hospitality” which will invade our privacy, ruin our china and make neighbors into members of the family of God. When faced with a choice of hoarding resources to ourselves or giving them away so generously we have to trust God to provide, we can decide the latter and give place for God to make a name for himself. When faced with a choice between going along with the crowd in the locker room or standing up cheerfully as a disciple of Jesus, we can choose the latter and prove to our peers that Jesus is a better friend.

II. Transformed Leaders

Notice this man is transformed from a hopeless suicidal man into a covenant head of his home, symbolized by the extension of baptism to every member of his household. The ESV gets the translation right, “And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.” Most other translations interpret what happened through their credo-baptist prejudice: “his entire household believed and were baptized.”

A. Narrative: All the baptisms in Acts where families are present are household baptisms (Ac. 10:48; 16:15; 16:33; 18:8; 1 Co. 1:16). Household baptism reveals that God’s manner of saving in the Old Testament has not changed in the New Testament. Throughout redemptive history he has delighted to save the heads of households and then give a covenant sign to the rest of the members, indicating his promise to bring the means of grace through that covenant head into the household and use those means in such a way to cause grace to run through lines of generations. This principle of corporate community or household unity is a tough one for us Americans to appreciate. As Tocqueville said of us upon his visit to our country, Americans do not understand community because they only have a vocabulary for the individual. So we tend to read our Bibles individualistically. To do so is however to miss the rich character of God’s covenant of grace.

I am not saying that baptism indicates every member of the household will certainly be saved. But I am saying on the basis of the revelation of God’s heart in the Old Testament as well as by observation of church history that it seems to be God’s practice to save most of the children reared in a home where the means of grace are faithfully administered. Baptism symbolizes and seals our “partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace.” From the beginning of redemptive history God has related to his people covenantally (Ge. 15:1-6; 17:1-8; Ga. 3:8,9); that is, he has committed himself to saving a people for himself (Ac. 17:1-26). He has also chosen to do so primarily by causing his grace to run through lines of generations (Is. 59:21; Ac. 2:38,39). That explains why we observe throughout Scripture the “household” or representative principle (Ge. 14:14-16; 17:23; Ex. 12:3,4; 1 Co. 7:14). That principle relates to God’s preference for visiting salvation on those who are under the authority of the head of the home (Ge. 17:10-14, 23; Ex. 12:43-48; Dt. 10:16; Co. 2:13; He. 11:7). Therefore, it only makes sense that when God draws the head of a household to Christ that he would put his covenant sign on the whole household. God’s gracious ideal is that children never remember a day without trusting Christ. Think of those in Scripture who trusted God for salvation from their earliest days: David trusted God from his mother’s breast (Ps. 22:9), Jeremiah was set apart as a prophet in his mother’s womb (Je. 1:5), John the Baptist leapt in his mother’s womb at the announcement of Christ (Lk. 1:41), and Timothy knew the Scriptures from infancy through his godly mother and grandmother (2 Ti. 1:5; 3:15).

So when God saves you, he is not writing a short story. He is writing an episode in a long narrative called the covenant. He is saving you to be a covenant leader in the household of God. As you yield yourself to him he will cause his grace to run through lines of generations, whether you are married with your own children, married without children, or single without children. God makes you a fountainhead of grace to all the children of the congregation.

B. Meta-narrative: Not only is God writing a long narrative through this Philippian jailer's salvation, he is writing a meta-narrative which demonstrates the fulfillment of his promise to Abraham to put the world back together into a form even better than it was originally created to be.

We saw this first in the salvation of the Roman centurion Cornelius, a Gentile in a social class Peter would have despised made a brother in Christ. We saw in the salvation of Lydia. The baptism of her household identified her as the spiritual head of her household. To use the same language as used for Abraham to describe the way salvation was brought within the grasp of those dependent on her, was to identify her as a son of Abraham. She was viewed by God to have all the rights and privileges as a firstborn son, including becoming the source of blessing to her household. And we saw it in the salvation of the Gentile, demon-possessed slave girl transformed into a liberated member of the household of God.

Remember the promise to Abraham in chapter 12 follows the tragedy of the tower of Babel in chapter 11. The people rebelled against God's command to fill the earth. They determined they would become mono-cultural and create their own religion by building a tower from earth to heaven. God defeated their religion and forced them to spread out. To Abraham he revealed in chapter 12, he scattered the people in order to achieve his aim of gathering children from every tribe, tongue, people and nation into one family through one Savior. In place of their tower he built a ladder from heaven to earth. Bringing salvation from heaven to earth was revealed in a dream to Jacob, objectified in the temple, and personified in Jesus Christ. Christ bridges all false divides. He bridges the gap between a holy God and sinful man. By leaving his riches and becoming a son of Mary, he bridged the gap of wealth and poverty. He came not to the East or the West, but to the Middle East. And though born a Jew he had Gentile blood in his lineage.

Christ made a Roman centurion, a Gentile single mom, a Gentile demon possessed slave girl, and a Philippian jailer into sons of Abraham. Thinking through that list removes every excuse you may have for thinking you do not belong in our church family. Regardless of your social class, your marital state, your past brokenness, or current condition, when Jesus saves you he makes you a stakeholder in the church and a son of Abraham through whom he will bring blessings to the nations.

III. Truly simple

Notice how simply the Apostles answer the jailer's profound question. They do not give a long convoluted, theologically elaborate presentation of salvation. They simply utter the universal command, "Believe on the Lord Jesus," and the absolutely gracious promise, "and you will be saved." You and I must pray and be ready to give a brief but brilliant account for the hope that is within us when we have opportunity to speak to someone about his soul.

My wife, Jackie, and I visited the Ninth Ward of New Orleans shortly after Hurricane Katrina. There we met with a friend of ours who had pioneered a mission among the boys of that neighborhood. These were boys without dads, living in abject poverty, accustomed to gang violence, and fully expecting to pursue the typical career of dealing drugs. My friend moved into their neighborhood, coached their football team, cooked dinner for them every night, taught them the Bible and theology,

and loved them well. He eventually started a church with them and as they grew into adults, they grew into the leaders.

Early in the church's life, one of the young men he led to Christ was going to live with his girlfriend. My friend told him he couldn't do that; he had to get married. The young man did not know what he was talking about. There had not been a marriage in that neighborhood in fifty years. Trusting his spiritual leader as he did, he agreed to get married. The couple started a home remodeling business and started rebuilding their neighborhood. A few years later, he and his wife had a baby who was then baptized in their church.

This was the little family now sitting with Jackie and me in the Ninth Ward. All around us was devastation and hopelessness, but that household baptized in the name of Jesus Christ was an irrefutable testimony to the repairing power of the gospel. Jesus saved that young boy and young girl and made them children of Abraham and because of that salvation, their child would grow up never remembering a day he did not hear that Jesus loved him.

Rosaria Butterfield says God never gets the address wrong. Anybody else arriving in the Ninth Ward in the last fifty years was there only because they got lost. But God showed up there because he intended to. That same God has shown up at your address to invite you to come to his banquet through Jesus. He did not get the address wrong. He came because he wanted you. Embrace the good news he is offering to you today or retelling you today and allow him to reimagine your life.