

“Wall Shaking Songs”

June 1, 2025

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Acts 16: 16-34

The 16th chapter of Acts is the story of the founding of the church in Philippi. And it all began with a series of roadblocks. Paul and Silas first wanted to go east into Asia, but verse 6 says they were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit.” Then they tried to go north, but verse 7 says, “the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.” They started to get a little frustrated and a little confused until verse 9 explains that “During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’” So they went. This was the gospel’s first journey into modern day Europe. Paul picked Philippi for his first stop because it was a leading Roman city in the area. When the sabbath came, it says, they went down “by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.” A woman named Lydia was moved by Paul’s words and invited them to stay with her. They never did find the man from Paul’s vision, but that is okay. Women first carried the news of Jesus’ resurrection. Women were the first believers in Europe, and women raised the money and hired the evangelist for the revival which lead to the founding of First Christian Church in Rochester.

One day while walking from Lydia’s house to the place of prayer by the river, an enslaved women started following Paul and Silas. She would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” Initially this was a good thing. The woman was known for being able to see things that others could not see. People paid big money to have her tell their fortunes and see what others could not. She actually made her owners good money with her spirit of divination. It is interesting to note that the spirit was right. Paul and Silas were slaves of the Most High God. This “spirit” not only knew the Most High God, but knew Paul and Silas were God’s servants. The problem was Paul got so annoyed by her following them around and crying out all the time, that he used the name of Jesus to order the spirit out of her, and it left. Finally, he could share Jesus without being interrupted all the time. But that didn’t last long. Without the spirit of divination in her, this woman could no longer be rented out for parties and fortune telling. Her owners lost a revenue source and were not going to just let that go. Because Paul and Silas were new in town and didn’t have family and connected people to defend them, they quickly found themselves being beaten with rods and thrown in prison where they were taken to the innermost part of the prison and chained to the wall. That is when verse 25 says, “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.”

I want to pause here for a moment. What do they have to sing praises about? God stopped them from going north and east like they wanted to. God sent a vision of a man asking for help, and when Paul and Silas respond, they never get to meet the man in the vision, but

instead get arrested, beaten with rods, stripped bare, and thrown in the innermost part of the jail. All because they are trying to be Jesus followers and respond to the Holy Spirit. And here they are, humiliated, beaten, bruised, cold, chained to the wall praying and singing hymns to God. The Message translation says, "Paul and Silas were at prayer and singing a robust hymn to God." The King James Version says, "Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God." I don't get it. If it were me, I might be praying, but it wouldn't be praises. God set them up for nothing but pain and misery. Maybe this is evidence of Jesus revealing Himself to His disciples but not the rest of the world like we talked about last week. Revealing Himself in the peace. Remember John 14: 27, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." They could sing because Jesus revealed Himself to them and they had a peace beyond what the world can see or comprehend. Maybe it is more than that. Maybe the peace came because they prayed. Maybe peace was revealed to them because they sang praises to God. Maybe what it is telling us is when you feel like praying the least, you need to pray the most. When you feel like singing praises the least, you need to sing them the most.

For look what happens next. The earth starts to shake, breaking all the leg-irons and chains, and unlocking the prison doors. For the 3rd time in the book of Acts the Holy Spirit has orchestrated a prison break. But Paul and Silas do not run out of the prison? None of the other prisoners charged down the open corridor either. This prison break is different. This is not about saving Paul and Silas. This is about the jailer. The jailer is about to kill himself because he has failed in his duty. Roman honor requires it. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer calls for lights and runs to the depths of the prison. He skips the obvious questions like, "What happened?" or "Why didn't any of you run?" and jumps straight to the important one, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas answer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." Then the jailer brought them to his own home, washed and tended to their wounds from the day before, and shared a meal with them. The oppressor became the servant. A sure sign of a new disciple. For how will you know they are Jesus' disciples? Their love for one another. I don't know if they had wounds on their feet that needed washing, but we get the point. The roadblocks, the vision, the journey, the arrest, the beating, the earthquake; this whole thing was not about Paul and Silas. It was about the jailer.

And not just the jailer. Fast forward 2000 years. Not only has their story been remembered in this 16th chapter of Acts and help embolden us to sing and pray when we feel like it the least, but we have a book in our New Testament called Philippians because between those believers meeting in Lydia's house and those meeting at the jailer's house, a strong church grew in Philippi. A church that would receive a joyful letter from Paul that includes incredible treasures like, "I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of

going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”

I am learning that sometimes the hardship and challenges that I occasionally have to endure, are not always about me. They are not about what I have done right or I have done wrong. Sometimes they are for others. Others very close to me, and others I might not ever know. So I am learning when I feel like praying the least, is when I need to pray the most. When I feel like singing praises to God the least, is when I need to sing praises the most. Jesus will reveal Himself with a peace that the world does not understand. This hardship may not be about me, but be about someone near or far who needs to know, “What must I do to be saved.”

Mike Van Heyningen