

**May 8, 2016**

**TEXT: Acts 16:16–34**

**TITLE: Setting Captors Free**

Imagine the drama of Acts 16 unfolding before you as a play in three acts. Yet before the curtains open, you hear a narrator read from the gospel of Luke a few verses that described Jesus' first sermon—one he gave in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth: *As Jesus stood up to read, he unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim release to the captives."*

Then the curtains open to a crowded marketplace scene. Lots of people are moving around, and the Christian missionaries Paul and Silas are jostled as they cross the stage. According to the bible story, Paul had received a vision to leave his home country and head further up the Mediterranean coast into Greece—leaving the world of Jewish communities of faith and preaching now in the land of the Greeks, a people long considered to be outside of God's favor and grace. While they are walking, a slave girl who has a spirit of fortune-telling and prophecy begins shouting, "These men are slaves of God here to proclaim a way of salvation, of freedom." Paul was new to town, a stranger in their city, and likely didn't need a noisy PR person tailing him in the marketplace. So he heals her. He casts out her spirit of divination, which was part of the good news of the gospel. He freed this captive girl, at least on a spiritual level, since she was sadly still considered the property of her owners.

Ah, yes—her owners. They are not amused at having their money-making slave cured of her affliction. The owners whistle for the police and quickly incite the mob against these Jewish ne'er-do-wells. Angry because their pocketbooks have been affected, the men quickly start shouting anti-Semitic slander: *These men are Jews. They advocate customs unlawful for us Romans.* Soon Paul and Silas are beaten and put behind bars. The liberators are now the incarcerated. The ones able to proclaim a way of salvation appear unable to save themselves. It calls to mind the taunts shouted at Jesus when he was crucified on the cross and mocked by those who said, "*He saved others, yet cannot save himself. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now.*" (Mt 27:42–43) And so ends Act 1 of this drama.

Before the second act opens, the narrator again reads a few verses about Jesus' inaugural sermon, but this time one single word is changed: *As Jesus stood up to read, he unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim release to the captors.* The curtains open to reveal a different scene altogether—the interior of a jail with rows of dark cells and a lone jailer pacing outside the locked doors with a key securely tied to his belt. The prisoners are shackled to the walls, just as the jailer himself is shackled to his job, chained to a duty that will cost him his life if he fails and anyone escapes.

Somewhere in the shadows, Paul and Silas are there, singing psalms and hymns. Suddenly an earthquake strikes; the walls collapse; the cell doors open and the chains fall away. As the dust settles, the jailer pulls out his dagger to kill himself when Paul's voice says, "Do not hurt yourself! We are all here." Recognize that an overly generous act of liberation has occurred here. Just as all the Hebrew people were rescued from Egypt, unconditionally—just as 10 lepers were healed even though only one returned to thank Jesus—just as a slave girl was freed of her evil spirit, even though she never asked for this liberation—an entire prison is set free by God's grace. The jailer's carefully guarded key is useless now. In that moment, he asks the universal question of all people of faith, "What must I do to be saved, to be set free?" The answer is "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." Captives and captors set free by the grace of God made known in Jesus Christ.

It's intermission time for our play and the lights come back up in the auditorium. To flesh out that wonderful answer, "believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved," I want to take a moment to share something from an essay I recently read. A woman was interviewed who is battling early onset Alzheimer's. So often we associate this disease with a loss of memory, but it is different from that. Alzheimer's involves the loss of executive function, of being unable to remember the sequence of steps in a process. You start to shave but forget to put on shaving cream. You want a piece of toast, but you forget to remove the bread from the toaster oven so it catches on fire. With Alzheimer's, there is the loss of a sense of elapsed time. Past, present and future all meld together. The woman said she felt forever in the present. These are her words: "Breakfast, shower, lunch, dinner, movie, shopping, everything conflated together and happening right now. It's morning and then afternoon and I think the morning was yesterday. It's always just the present."<sup>1</sup>

One of the harshest forms of captivity is to be stuck under the tyranny of the present moment. Like early onset Alzheimer's, your whole world is focused on the immediate, on the "right now." Yet this blending together of time also means you lose the ability to think sequentially, to hold onto a larger purpose in your life. You say to yourself, "I have so much to do, I don't know where to start." It's a type of captivity that affects the jailed and the jailer alike. "I'm bored now, so I'll go shopping although I don't need more stuff. I feel empty now, so I'll fill that emptiness with anything: with gambling, with eating, with hooking up, with gossip. I'm addicted so all I can focus on is another hit, another high, another drink."

This "present moment" captivity affects individuals, businesses, and governments all the time. Sales quotas have to be met, so all your energy goes into making those sales, no matter what. Profit reports are due each quarter, so businesses hide losses and massage numbers to make things look rosy for their shareholders. America's addiction to fossil fuels means there was an uproar over lost jobs when the XL pipeline plan was scuttled, until those same Canadian oil sands erupt in flames and 300 square miles including the town of Ft. McMurray is burnt

to the ground. Or when a high-pressure gas line from a supposedly safe fracking operation in Westmoreland County explodes, destroying two nearby homes. Captivity to the present is like early onset Alzheimer's of the soul. We live trapped in the present moment—a slave girl owned by someone else for their gain, a jailer pacing before locked doors yet a captive himself, people caught in the unrelenting now.

After the earthquake, Paul was asked, "What must I do to be saved?" And he answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." Jesus, the One who was in the beginning, through whom all things were made. Jesus, the One who is—the One who was incarnate into our history, the sequences of time unfolding both back in ancient Greece and Rome and still unfolding today, right now. Jesus, the One who will be—who is with us always, even to the end of the age. To name Jesus and to consider him in relation to our own lives pulls us out of the unrelenting "now" and into the fullness of time. That's why Paul says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus" —on Jesus, who is a foundation upon which we build our lives. A road we travel that stretches back in time and far toward the future horizon. The One who heals our emptiness and can end our addictions. Who gives us a purpose, a moral grounding stronger than the bad choices of the immediate moment. Who gives us hope and life and, yes, who is the One who saves us.

Intermission is over. The lights dim and our focus returns to the stage for the third act of the drama. The curtains open on a domestic scene—the home of the jailer. Paul and Silas are there quietly talking to the man and his family. A double-washing occurs. First the wounds of the apostles are taken care of and then the family, young and old, are washed with baptism water. A meal is set out on a long table, and there is prayer and much laughter. The same songs earlier sung behind bars now are now offered up around this common table. There is much rejoicing before the Lord.

The false gospel of the world would insist that only the present moment matters. "Live for now—whatever it takes to be happy right now." Yet whether we are behind bars or hold the keys in our hands—that is the way of spiritual captivity. Paul has wisely offered this remedy, "Believe on the Lord Jesus." Trust in the one who is our foundation, our rock and our redeemer, the Lord of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

On the stage we see a scene of a beloved community, sharing a meal, stepping into a new life and saving future. Then the curtains close and the narrator speaks one last time, quoting Paul's words from the letter to the Galatians: *In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

AMEN

---

<sup>1</sup> N.R. Kleinfeld, "Fraying at the Edges," *New York Times*, May 1, 2016, p. 4 Special Section.