

A witness to a jailer – Acts 16:16-40

WCP

**Intro**

I'm sure none of you who are married/in a relationship of some kind ever have this issue in your own lives, but communication – which is a pretty essential component of any healthy relationship - continues to be an “area of growth” in my marriage. Sometimes it's tone of voice, other times it's the amazing ability we have to take a simple question from the other person and hear it with the most insulting, angry, dismissive intent possible. Like my wife will say, “Hey, can I help you with that babe?” but I'll hear that as, “Are you not strong/manly enough to carry that by yourself peewee?” Or “Should I text you to remind you to pick that thing up?” becomes “Since you're an incapable moron, would you like me to hold your hand through this so it actually gets done for once?” Why do we do that? All I can say is - very clearly - God's not done with us yet.

But other times, communication difficulties arise – maybe you can relate to this – when we apply a different definition to a word than was intended by the person speaking/writing/etc. Easiest place to illustrate that is with the word “fine.” Now, at a certain age, every man comes to understand that that word “fine” can be a bit of a mine field whenever it's encountered. I'm a pretty direct person when it comes to communication, so if I ask how my daughter is doing, and she says “fine” I'm gonna be like, “Great! Glad you're ok.” and move on. But, of course, it's not that simple b/c context/tone of voice/even body language can all take the meaning of a simple word like “fine” and flip that meaning entirely on its head. And well beyond that - whether you're a man or a woman here today - if we're honest, I think there's a breakdown in this area of our communication b/c - a lot of times - we simply take a word and apply the meaning we *want* it to have; and we do that b/c it's the definition that serves our own needs best.

And there's a lot of different places we do this, *even* in the way we read the bible. One example could be words like “saved/rescued.” Now, there's probably not a person in here who doesn't hear those words and immediately picture someone being pulled out of/removed from danger of some kind. But if we try to apply that one definition/understanding of “rescued” to every occurrence of it in the bible, we're going to have a pretty hard time understanding a lot of passages; like - for instance - **2 Tim. 3:11** where the apostle Paul is looking back over his truly harrowing experiences in some of these towns we looked at a few weeks ago (Iconium, Lystra, Derbe): death threats/persecution/almost stoned to death – and can still close out his remembrance of all that by stating, “*Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.*” Now, sure, if not *dying* is being “rescued” then, yeah, ok Paul; I guess you were “rescued” from all those things. But most of us are going to see Paul's escaping being stoned in Iconium: *that's* being rescued; but are gonna have a pretty hard time seeing how *being* stoned and then left for dead in Lystra, as also being rescued.

But do you see, already, that should reveal to us that there's a breakdown in our communication with Paul/bible; b/c we're trying to apply one definition of the word “rescued”

when Paul seems to have a broader definition in mind in 2 Tim. 3. Why? Well, I think it's b/c we want the definition of "rescued" to always be rescued from/out of something, when the reality is that – throughout the bible - sometimes "rescued" doesn't mean rescued from/out of at all, it means rescued *through*. And I think the reason we do that with the bible – probably not even consciously – is b/c when we ask God to rescue *us* from something we're going through: cancer diagnosis, difficult marriage, kids blowing up their lives with bad choices, etc. what we want is for God to get us outta there; "God I'm asking to be rescued from those situations, not given the strength/grace to endure through them."

So, in light of that, I'm praying our passage today is going to help improve all of our communication with God and His word a great deal; b/c we're going to see - first of all - that we can't apply the same definition of "rescue" to every hardship we face, but secondly, I think this passage also gives us some clues as to why God chooses to rescue us *out of* some hardships, but rescue us *through* some others.

So, to help frame our discussion, I want to look at our passage in three ways this morning. I want to show you: **Rescued from hardships, rescued through hardships**, and then finally **God's purpose in both (x2)**.

So, if you've close your bibles, please open them again to Acts 16:16 and follow along with me as we look now at **a witness to a jailer**.

So, let's look first of all at:

### **1. Rescued from hardships**

Now, this is the definition of "rescue" everybody loves to talk about – a regular plotline in literature and film - and, as I said, I think it's the definition that we also tend to apply to pretty much every request for rescue we have from God as well.

And what's really encouraging to see here is that this *is* also one of the definitions the bible uses throughout for rescue: being rescued/saved *out of* some kind of danger/peril.

And you see that definition of rescue even in our passage today; for instance in **vss. 16-18**. Now – to give us some context - if you look at **vs. 16** we see that Paul and Silas are at this "place of prayer" in the Roman colony of Philippi. Now, something to note quickly:

- This "place of prayer" is *not* a Jewish synagogue that they're at; this is the same place, outside the city gates where - a few days earlier - Paul and Silas had met this Gentile God-fearer Lydia/"Donna Karan" of C1, and God had saved her and her whole family. But it's important to have our bearings here, b/c the fact that this Jewish place of prayer is outside the city, should already be giving us some clues as to how these Philippian Gentiles viewed the Jews/Judaism in general.



But, as they're out there continuing to try and preach/teach the gospel, all of a sudden this demon possessed slave girl shows up and starts following Paul and his crew around everywhere they go; causing a big scene. Look at **vs. 17 (READ vs. 17-18a)**.

Now, you don't see it in this translation, but what the NIV translates here in vs. 16 as "a spirit by which she predicted the future," some of your translations will read as "a spirit of divination." Which, in biblical times, included everything from clairvoyance (predicting the future) to summoning the spirits of the dead, and all of it by the power of demonic forces.

But what we do see here is that this slave girl is following Paul around shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved!" which, when you first read it, you might think, "...ok. Isn't that a good thing? What she's saying about them is true, so isn't this basically like free press for Paul and Silas; like a peanuts/popcorn salesman at a baseball game drawing a crowd?"

And the short answer is no, this is not a good thing. And we know it's not good b/c:

- Paul doesn't think it's good; and we know that b/c he's rebuking this demonic spirit, not thanking it for the help.
- "The Most High God" in Philippi was *not* the God of the bible, it was Zeus; and almost everyone there would have understood it that way.
- Paul is concerned with the distraction of her shouting, but – even more so - with people connecting the gospel message with demon possession; kind of like having Kim Jong Un publically endorsing your social justice festival/not exactly the kind of publicity you'd want. And so here, if people begin to conflate the gospel and demon-possession, it could discredit the message before Paul even preaches it.

But when this keeps going on for days, and – in **vs. 18** – we see that Paul has finally had enough, Paul and his companions *are* rescued/saved out of this demonic attack by the power of Jesus working through them, as Paul exorcizes this spirit of divination out of the slave girl. And, I think it's important to state, this slave girl is *also* rescued from enslavement – both to this demonic spirit, as well as to these men who are making a great profit from her oppression.

So, I think this is clearly an example of **rescue** according to that first definition. There's no epic battle they have to endure; no Linda Blair/Ghostbusters confrontation going on. Paul just rebukes this evil spirit in the name of Jesus, and - the end of vs. 18 tells us - the spirit just leaves her at that very moment!

### App

And when we think of the rescue that we're usually asking for in our prayers when we're facing some difficulty, it's hard to imagine a better picture of what we hope will happen: you're dealing with some hard situation which you try to figure out on your own; you can't, so you ask Jesus for help and – bam! – Jesus steps in and rockets you out of that hardship. Done! Easy!

And considering that, what I want to highlight for us here is that this type of rescue from God *is possible*; is *entirely* within God's power to perform.



But I wonder if – as much as this is absolutely the kind of rescue we always *want* from God – if we don't forego/give up the opportunity to actually *be* rescued like this, b/c we don't even bother to ask for it in the first place; we're so convinced that God either won't, or *can't*, rescue us like we're hoping He will, so why bother even asking?

But do you realize how backward that is? That's like having a heart attack where you're in desperate need of rescue, but then presuming the ambulance probably won't get there in time to help (rush hour, etc.), so you don't even bother to call one!

And I think the solution to that kind of thinking, is to return to the kind of understanding of/prayer to God we saw the apostles having in Acts 4; praying to the "Sovereign Lord", to the One who "made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them"; the One who "laughs" at the nations who rage /plot against Him and holds them in derision.

I'm convinced, when you remind yourself of *that* God/remember that He is the One you're asking for rescue, it ought to inspire and embolden you to ask for such a miraculous rescue. B/c if Jesus truly is who He said He was - and who we see Him proving Himself over and over again to be through the book of Acts - then that means He is also the same Jesus we can come to today in the midst of whatever hardship/difficulty that we're facing; trusting that He is *more* than able to rescue us from that overwhelming fear/worry, and powerful *still* to save us from anything that may come against us.

Ok, so that's what **Rescued from hardships** can look like. Next, I want us to look at:

## **2. Rescued through hardships**

And we need to look at this b/c – although there *are* notable examples in the bible of being rescued *from* the hardships we face in life – there are, by far, more examples of being rescued *through* them. And we'll get into the reason for that in our last point, but for the moment, I want to spend a minute looking at a demonstration of what that looks like from our passage, as Paul and Silas continue to be witnesses in Philippi.

If you look at **vss. 19-21** you see another example of differing definitions of words; b/c while Paul and this slave girl see what just happened as being rescued from this demonic spirit, the owners of this slave girl see what Paul did as "rescuing" them from receiving a paycheck, which they are clearly not too happy about.

And when you look at their accusation against Paul and Silas before the town magistrates in **vs. 20**, you see the clear anti-Semitic views of this town that I referred to earlier regarding the place of prayer. Look, their very first words in this public hearing are, "These men are Jews!" And by arousing both the protective as well as the nationalist sentiments of the city,



we see in **vs. 22-24** that Paul and Silas become the victims of court-sanctioned mob violence. We see in **vs. 22-23** they are stripped and “severely flogged” before the crowd.

Now, in this time period the magistrates of the city would carry around a bundle of rods which symbolized their authority; and so what you have here is Paul and Silas receiving a severe caning; which means they would have left bloody, bruised, likely with fractured ribs. And then, after this brutal public flogging, they are handed over to the jailer who - when told to guard them carefully – goes above and beyond the call of duty, and places them both in the darkest inner bowels of the prison *and* with their feet fastened in stocks.

One commentator was very helpful in giving us an accurate historical picture of all this; pointing out that stocks were, actually, a form of torture. They weren’t these fun wooden handcuffs that you get a selfie in when you visit a museum; they were designed both to secure a prisoner as well as to make them as uncomfortable as possible during their stay.

And that’s one of the things that makes this passage so striking to read: b/c inside 10 verses you go from Paul and Silas being delivered from a demonic attack, to – ostensibly – not being delivered at all, as they undergo this horrific, humiliating treatment.

And yet, this is also now an amazing, side-by-side example of what being rescued *through* hardships looks like. And we know Paul and Silas are being rescued through this trial, long before they’re ever physically rescued, because of what we read in **vs. 25** – look with me there. At the end of a horrific day of corporal punishment and torture at the hands of an angry mob and an over-eager jailer we read this (**READ vs. 25**). And you read that, and you ask yourself, “How in the world could they be praying and singing hymns to God after suffering all that?!” And the answer is: because, in this moment, they were not being rescued *from* this hardship, they were being rescued *through* it.

### App

And I don’t know what hardships all of you facing today as we sit together in this service; I know some of them b/c I know many of you and you’ve been courageous enough to share them with me; but we’re also pretty skilled practitioners at “cleaning up” before we come in to church Sunday morning; and I have no doubt there are people sitting here right now who are facing some unimaginable things with no idea when or how your rescue will ever come.

But, wherever you’re at this morning, I pray you are knowing, or will know, the sustaining grace and power God grants His children as He rescues them through hardships like we’re seeing here in our passage.

How can you know/experience it yourself? Well, one way is to begin with what we looked at a few weeks ago in Acts 14 and the expectation of suffering/hardship in the Christian life. Remember Paul’s loving heads up to the congregations he visited was, “*We must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God.*”; no, not b/c we’ve been abandoned somehow by God, but b/c the Christian faith was never meant to offer an escape from the suffering of living in a world broken by sin, but only a transforming hope in the midst of it.

But the other way to know/experience this sustaining grace as God rescues you *through* hardship is to follow the example of Paul and Silas here in our passage. B/c, here’s the thing:



we look at Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns to God as the result of their being rescued through this hardship; what I would like to suggest to you is that perhaps their singing/praying was not the *result* of being rescued through hardship, but the *means* of attaining it. What do I mean by that? Well, consider Paul's words written to the church he planted in this very city of Philippi years later in **Phil. 4:4-7 (READ Phil. 4:4-7)**.

Do you see it now? Praying and singing hymns to God in the bowels of this prison was the means by which Paul and Silas were rescued through this hardship, not the result of it. As they turned their gaze not inward, but upward; as they fixed their eyes – as the author of Hebrews tells us – not on themselves but on Jesus who, for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame; *that's* how they were rescued through this hardship.

And I believe it can truly be *just* the same for you and I today in whatever hardship we are facing/will face. I swear to you, in some of the darkest, most desperate dungeons of my own life, I have known that sweetest/most intimate embrace of the Father that – although it did not change my circumstances in at all – changed my whole experience of them as God rescued me through those hardships. And as you turn your prayers/praises to Jesus in the midst of whatever you're facing, I know it will be just the same for you.

As the 3<sup>rd</sup> C Christian historian Tertullian wrote of this scene, "The legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven."

So, that's the amazing contrast Luke offers us here in the single narrative of both **rescue from hardships** as well as **rescue through hardships**. But the question we still haven't considered is: Why? Why does God allow us to go through hardships at all and, more to the point I made earlier – although He is *able* to rescue us from hardships, why is it that God's plans so much more often seem to be to rescue us *through* hardships than from them? It's important to recognize that - this side of heaven - there will always be mystery when it comes to the way God does things in this world. But, I think our passage also offers us good biblical warrant to suggest some ideas anyways as we look finally at:

### **3. God's purpose in both**

Now, **vs. 25** left us with Paul and Silas singing in the stocks; the very next verse shows us the kind of rescue *from* hardship that God could have easily brought about at any point, as He sends a violent earthquake to blow the doors off every cell in the jail. I love what my brother Bruce Milne had to say in his commentary on this passage as it relates to the way the Spirit has been empowering the witness of these apostles from the beginning, stating, "In a sense, the surprise would have been if there had been no earthquake!"

But as we read on, it's only now that Paul and Silas – and we – begin to see something of God's purpose in rescuing them through this hardship and not out from it. For now - as Paul extends mercy towards his undeserving captor, and preserves his life where he would have otherwise surely have lost it for allowing the prisoners in his charge to escape – we see God's Kingdom purposes coming to fruition in this jailer's life as well as his family's life.

In **vs. 27-28** we see Paul rescues the jailer from taking his own life shouting, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"; and then in **vs. 29** we read (**READ vss. 29-30**).

Now, with regards to the point we've made a few times about how secular people hear the call to follow Jesus, we see here again, this jailer – although humbled and certainly willing – still hears the call to follow Jesus as a call to *do* something/something he has to accomplish for himself; which then provides Paul with the perfect opportunity to now offer gospel freedom to him. You see in **vs. 31** Paul and Silas say (**READ vs. 31a**); basically, what they're saying is, "You don't have to do anything; simply believe/put your faith in what Jesus has already done for you, and you'll be saved!" And he does believe; in fact his whole family comes to believe the gospel and be baptized; and then, in this beautiful display of the gospel community that has now been created, you see in **vs. 33** - as the early church father Chrysostom wrote - the man whose sins have just been washed, now washes the wounds of Paul and Silas.

### **App**

Now, no, it's not everything, but I think this story alone gives us some really helpful insights into why God might rescue us *from* some hardships but rescue us *through* most others.

In one sense, God rescues Paul and Silas *through* this hardship in order to grow their own faith and trust in God as they witness yet another instance of God's faithfulness to them as they fix their gaze on Him.

But the bigger answer – and you see it all through chapter 16 – is that God has a plan/purpose He's accomplishing in this world; in this instance, it's to expand His Kingdom and build His church in this Roman city of Philippi; and as His witnesses are willing to faithfully follow wherever He leads, and to be used in whatever way He needs/whatever the cost, they get the amazing privilege of coming along for the ride.

But we set ourselves up for regular, crushing disappointment whenever we enter into the Christian life with an expectation that we're just gonna present God with a life-plan and purposes of our own, all nicely drawn up, that He's just going to sign off on for us; when we see God as nothing more than a genie in a lamp/a means by which we can accomplish our *own* purposes for life. And one of the many benefits of a passage like ours this morning is to inform/remind us: that's not how God designed life in Him to work.



### Conclusion

And as we close this morning, I want to invite you in these last few minutes together to ask yourself/seriously consider some hard questions:

1. Where have I doubted God's faithfulness to me/even blamed Him for unfaithfulness when He didn't rescue me out from some hardship, but chose to carry me through it instead? As we said last Sunday, you don't put God in your debt; and obedience to Him doesn't purchase any of us a "get out of jail free" card.

2. Will you endure whatever hardships God may be calling you to right now, trusting that – even if He doesn't rescue you *from* them – He is still accomplishing His perfect plan/purposes in you, and in this world, *through* them?

I pray you've seen from what we've looked at this morning, how a deepened, broadened, truly biblical understanding of that word "rescue" can both dramatically improve your communication with God and with His word, *and* expand your understanding of the purposes of God in your life should He ever choose to rescue you through, and not from, hardship.

Let's pray.