

Reading: Acts 16 v 30

‘What must I do to be saved?’

The words of the gaoler in Philippi to Paul and Silas after the earthquake that wrecked the prison.

I hope you all listened to the story, I know it was a long one, but anyway I’m going to reimagine it through the eyes of the gaoler.

‘Prison Governor, that’s me. Alright, it’s not everyone’s idea of a dream career, but times were hard when I started out and you had to take what you could get. Started right at the bottom, and worked my way up.

Work hard, show respect to the magistrate, don’t take any chances. Once they see they can rely on you, that you’re a safe pair of hands, you’ll get along. And look at me now, a respectable man. I can hold my head up high. I can look after my family, wife’s got all the latest appliances at home (well, slaves really), I can give the kids a good education.

Of course, in my job you can’t be popular with everyone. Especially when so many of the locals don’t seem to buy into all the benefits of Roman justice. So a delicate conscience won’t get you anywhere in this job. Leave the moral issues to the magistrates, I’ve got my job to do.

Take that pair that have just come in, Paul and Silas. Have they really done any harm? Well, magistrate wouldn’t send’em here if they hadn’t, would he? Maybe they didn’t break any laws, but two foreigners turning up and causing a fuss, we can do without that. Magistrate told me. If this goes on I’ll have the Governor on my back. Never mind the legal niceties, I want quiet on the streets. I took the hint. Gave ‘em our gold service hospitality. Locked them up in the safest cell I’ve got, shackles, stocks and all. Not my job to take chances for their sake. Safe pair of hands, that’s me.

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And now look what’s happened. Not a wall or a door left in place. It’s not my fault. I can’t help it if a flaming earthquake flattens the prison, can I? But they’ll blame me! Governor’ll blame the Magistrate, Magistrate’ll blame me. Safe pair of hands – that’s what we pay you for. Well not any more. I’ll lose everything. Reputation, job, self-respect. Where will I find

another job after this? Who'll take on a failed prison guard? How will I face my family? They'll lose everything that matters to them. I might as well end it all now.

I already had the knife at my wrist. And then I heard voices. Them two, Paul and Silas. They were still there. All they had to do was get up and walk out. I'd done them no favours had I, why should they do me any favours? I was down and all they had to do was kick me. You don't see much mercy in the prison business. I'd shown them none. But here they were – showing mercy to me!

What do I have to do to be saved? I wasn't going all spiritual. All I meant was, how do I get myself out of this mess. Did they want an apology, did they want compensation? No. They just wanted me to believe in their God. Then I'd be alright, and so would my family.

And it was like rising from the dead. It wasn't all over. I hadn't lost everything. And yet, in a way, I had. When I walked back home to my wife and kids, with Paul and Silas in tow, I was a different man. Not the Prison Governor any more, not the Safe Pair of Hands, not the man who can show off his home and his family to the best in town. All that was gone, and yet I walked home with my head held high. Now, I was the man that God had shown mercy to. I was the man that God loved.

And you've got to see the funny side of it, haven't you. When the prison fell down – it was the jailer who was set free!

What must we do to be saved?

Well the answer in this story is: stop playing the jailer!

There's a judgmental streak in most of us. A kind of 'inner jailer.' Ready to appoint ourselves as guardians of public morality and judges of right and wrong. Happy, like our jailer, to shrug our shoulders at the misfortunes of other who are only 'getting what they deserve'.

Well, even if you're playing the jailer, that still means you're in gaol.

Jesus came to set us free from this. To teach us to see people differently, charitably. And Paul and Silas set us a wonderful example of that lesson. To them, the jailer was not a just cruel jobsworth who needed bringing

down a peg. They didn't see a chance to get their revenge, to make him suffer the consequences of his heartless actions. They saw a child of their God, a lost brother who needed to be set free. They had experienced God's power to change people's lives. The jailer in Philippi might not have looked very promising material, but they thought he was worth a try.

I wonder how many of the most difficult people we meet in our lives are, like the jailer, just waiting for someone to show them that glimpse of compassion in a time of need that will open their eyes to their God.

Because most people do have two heavy doors in their prison. We need to be set free from that instinctive, imprisoning habit of condemning others, but first we have to learn there is no condemnation for us.

Our jailer is shown mercy. Old fashioned word. Practical forgiveness, no punishment, a chance to start again. Mercy he had no right to expect it.

I've imagined a man who lives in deep insecurity, protecting himself from his own fears with the hard-earned trappings of professional self-respect, social status and household prosperity. But a man who knew that one professional mishap would bring it all crashing down.

Paul and Silas free him from that prison as well. He learns that failure, even spectacular failure, is not the end of everything. As the old walls crash down, our jailer can discover that he is still the child of a loving, forgiving God – and a member of a new, greater, and loving family of believers. There is life outside the prison walls.

What must I do to be saved? Well, God has already knocked down the walls and doors, so just walk out of your prison. But if you really want to be free, walk out hand in hand with your inner jailer, and don't let him, or her, ever turn back.

Amen.

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