

Acts Series Part 46

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[0 : 00] The year was 1978. The place, rather inauspiciously, the boys' toilets at Dornach Academy, and the graffiti scrawled on the wall was as follows, Jesus saves, Dalgleish nets the rebound. Now I can tell you one thing for sure, that Dalgleish hasn't netted a rebound in a long, long time, but Jesus continues to save. But what does that mean? What does it mean to say, Jesus saves? What do you understand by this statement, Jesus saves? What does it involve? What does it look like?

Or getting a bit more personal, are you saved? I remember being asked that question as an 11-year-old at a Scripture Union camp on a beach on the Pacific coast of Peru. I had no idea of what to say in answer to the question. As I recall, and the memory is a vivid one, because I cringe greatly at being challenged in this way, what I do recall is that I mumbled something suitably non-committal, and made as sharp an exit as I possibly could. I wonder if you were similarly confronted with that question. Are you saved? How would you answer? Not in the relative comfort of a gathered congregation, when you can maybe just imagine that the question is addressed to somebody else. But if you were, in your face addressed with that question, are you saved? My own memory of being challenged with that question is so etched by the horror of that interrogation that some of you may be glad to hear,

I'm unlikely to be so direct with others, though perhaps I should be direct in that way. In the passage that we have read, we meet a man who wanted to be saved, was told how to be saved, and was saved. And this is a man whose experience can teach us a great deal about this matter of being saved. I would ask you to have your Bibles open in Acts chapter 16. If you have a Bible in front of you just keep it open in Acts chapter 16. If you have a Bible in Acts chapter 16, then you have a Bible study that you have a Bible in Acts chapter 16. If you have a Bible in Acts chapter 16, then you have a Bible story of one man who was saved by Jesus. Now, before we do consider some of the elements in the story, it is necessary to just recognize that this is the account of one man. And it's necessary to recognize that God deals with us as individuals in a very individual and unique way. And so, it would be wrong to conclude that everything that we find in this story will be found in the experience of all who are graciously the object of God's saving purposes. Nonetheless, there will be common elements that must be found in every story of God's work, His saving work in the lives of men and women.

At tea time, on the day of the events described that we've read earlier on in the service, the jailer, the man we're most interested in this morning, was not saved and, I suspect, had little interest and probably even less knowledge about the subject. What he wanted to do was deal with these preachers who he had been instructed to lock up by the magistrates, having secured them to secure the jail to have his dinner and get some kip. That was his, I'm sure, his primary concern, his agenda for the evening ahead.

But by breakfast, just a few short hours later, he was saved and his whole family to boot. What had happened between tea time and breakfast that turned this man's life upside down and inside out?

[4 : 48] What happened that had as its outcome that the jailer, by breakfast, was a saved man? Well, what did happen? I want to answer that question in a particular way. I want to notice certain things that God did in the life of the jailer. Now, it ought not to surprise us that in answering the question, what happened, we should and must focus on what God did in the life of this man, because being saved is, in the first instance, not about what we can do, what you can do, but about what God does for and in us. Well, what does God do in the life of this particular man, the Philippian jailer? The first thing I want you to notice about what God does is that He sends two of His disciples into the life of the jailer. He sends two of His own people, two men who had already enjoyed the experience of being saved. They are sent into the life of this man. We have read the passage. We

know the circumstances as to how that happened. They are sent into the prison by the magistrates because they were accused of causing a disturbance. Certainly a disturbance was caused, whether they could be held responsible as another matter, but they were sent to prison by the magistrates. And of course, that is where they will meet this man, for he is there waiting for them, as it were. I suppose the question we want to pose to see what is happening here in terms of the hand of God is, why are Paul and Silas arrested and thrown into jail? Why this arbitrary and brutal miscarriage of justice for that is what it was? Now, we could answer that question correctly in different ways.

We could point to the fury of the owners of the slave girl who had been liberated from her oppression and so was no longer a source of wealth for the owners. And they are the ones who move things around that Paul and Silas would be in trouble and eventually cast into prison. We could point to the fury of the mob, the whipped up fury of the mob, and what a frightening thing it is when a mob is whipped up, often on scanty evidence or for no real reason. And yet the mob is whipped up, and we could say, well, that's the reason why they ended up in prison. And of course, the spineless compliance of the magistrates to the wishes of the mob, all of these things could legitimately be identified as the reason why Paul and Silas are in prison. But the bottom line, the fundamental answer to the question, why are Paul and Silas thrown into this deep cell is that God was sending Paul and Silas into the life of the jailer. Paul and Silas were sent there by God. It was a divine appointment arranged by God, ordered by God, that this jailer, who in ordinary circumstances would never have met these men, would meet these men, and they would bring to him the message that he needed to hear. God had plans for the jailer, and He begins to order events in favor of our friend the jailer long before He had any notion of what is going on. And this is God's way. He is the one who takes the gracious initiative to come into our lives to save us. He looks for us long before we ever look for Him. He certainly knows what it means to say, even when we have little or no idea. And so often, the manner in which he takes this initiative is by using His people, by using those who have come to know Him by faith in Jesus Christ, those He has already saved, used by God to reach others. Now, in this case, these two crazy preachers, or certainly that is how they would have been perceived by many, are dumped into the life of the jailer.

Before we think a little bit more about that, I just pause and ask the question, I wonder, has God drawn into your life somebody to challenge you, perhaps to irritate you, perhaps to prod or encourage you that you would get to grips with who is this man, Jesus? Who is this Jesus of whom it is said? That He saves. There is, of course, also a challenge here for those of us who are disciples of Jesus. To whom is God sending you? Possibly, as with Paul and Silas, by means of most unwelcome and painful circumstances. To whom is God sending you? And what impact will you have to those to whom God is sending you? Well, I wonder what impact Paul and Silas had on this jailer, certainly at the beginning when they first meet. The answer really is that we don't know. We don't know what first impressions may have been caused. We don't know what the jailer thought of these men that he was instructed to tie up and secure in the prison, but I think we can speculate with a measure of foundation. It seems reasonable to presume that the jailer would have known the cause of their arrest, that they were preaching about some man called Jesus who was speaking about the way of salvation.

It's reasonable that they would have perhaps known something of that. Maybe he was intrigued. Maybe the jailer was intrigued by this. I wonder if he was struck by the manner in which they responded to their plight, their self-control, the absence of bitterness and anger. Yes, even the joy. [11:44] That was very strange. Tertullian is often quoted in connection with this incident, and the reason he's quoted is because something he said is very quotable in commenting on this, he says the following, the legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven. And it sounds very spiritual and very pious, and while I'm not quibbling with what he says, I wonder if what is even more remarkable is that when the legs in every part of the beaten bodies of Paul and Silas were aching with pain, were raking with pain, as I'm sure they were, they still are able to sing and to pray. Was this perhaps what impacted on this man? Well, we don't even know if he heard them singing. We're told that he was fast asleep when the earthquake strikes. But we can be pretty sure that when he did fall asleep that night, he was at the very least intrigued by these disciples of one called Jesus. So, what does God do? Well, God sends into the life of this jailer two men that they would be his means of bringing a message of hope to them. But there's another thing that we want to notice that God does, and it is this, that he shakes the very foundations of the earth in order to shake the

jailer and to shake him a big time.

God is not content simply with ordering the circumstances of the lives of Paul and Silas and the decisions of the magistrates of Philippi. God now proceeds in the account we have before us to shake the earth itself with just one man in mind, this Philippian jailer. And he aims to shake this man to the very core of his being, to fill him with dread and terror, to provoke in him a crisis of epic proportions. And he does all these things not out of cruelty, but out of great and deep love for him, because he loves him and wants to save him. He orders even and determines even the movement of the tectonic plates of this planet with a view to reaching and saving this man. I wonder if we appreciate to what lengths God will go to save a man, to rescue a woman. What does that say about how highly God values this man, this jailer, that he would go to such lengths to favor this man, to bring this man to a knowledge, a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ? To what lengths will God go to show how much he loves us? Well, he's gone way beyond just an earthquake.

God became in the person of his son, a man, and he offered his life in our place instead as a sacrifice for sin. That's how far God will go to demonstrate how much he loves us, to demonstrate how far he is willing to go to save us. But back to the earthquake and the conclusions of the jailer as he experiences this earthquake, well, again, we've read the story, and it's familiar to us. He's sound asleep, and then the earthquake strikes, and he wakes up. He presumes that the prisoners have escaped.

The doors are open, and it's a reasonable conclusion for him to come to. And as he surveys the scene, and this is not somebody who is thinking very carefully and rationally, he is disturbed. He is simply, in the measure that he can, trying to come to some kind of conclusion as he witnesses this chaotic sight before him. What does he conclude? Well, he concludes that he has no future and that all hope is gone. That is his conclusion. He has no future. In the light of what has happened, there is no hope for him.

And he decides that taking his own life is his only option, and that is a very dark place to be, and one which, tragically, many do come to and experience. Well, certainly it was true of this man.

[16 : 32] And I ask you the question, is God seeking to get your attention? It's not always, or indeed usually, as dramatic as it was with the jailer. But is he, by whatever means he chooses, perhaps by difficult, painful means? Is he seeking to gain your ear? Is he wanting to say something to you?

It might be an idea to listen to him before it does get too dramatic. What does God do? Well, God shakes the very foundations of the earth, that He would shake this man and prepare him for the message that he would bring to him. What else does God do? Well, the next thing we can notice is that God speaks words of hope and healing in the jailer's darkest hour. In the impenetrable darkness of that midnight hour, when all seemed lost, when His sword was practically drawing blood, God speaks.

To this man. Yes, the voice is the voice of Paul, but it is God who is speaking. And the words that He speaks are words of hope. And what are these words? Well, we find them there in verse 28. But Paul shouted with passion and with urgency and with authority, don't harm yourself. Don't harm yourself.

These are the words of hope that are directed to this desperate man. Don't harm yourself. And what do these words, simple words, easy to understand, what do these words tell us about the one who speaks these words? For these are the words of God spoken through Paul. What do they tell us about God? Well, they tell us that He knows you. He knows your circumstances. He knows your desperation. He knows your lack of hope. He knows what you're going through. He knows the turmoil in your soul. These things are known to Him. They're not known to those who are next to you. They know very little about you. But God knows He knew what this man was going through. It tells us not only that He knows, but that He cares. It pains Him to see this man about to harm himself. It pains Him to see this man about to take his life, this God-given, precious life. It tells us that He loves this man, that He is deeply interested in the welfare of this man, that He has a better way for this man, that there is hope for this man. And as all these things are true concerning God's opinion and concern for the

Philippian jailer, so they are true concerning His concern for you. He knows you. He cares for you. He loves you. He is deeply interested in your welfare. And He wants to show you a better way.

[19 : 56] He wants to demonstrate to you that there is hope. And so, I wonder, are these words also being directed to you? Don't harm yourself. Don't harm yourself. You know, unbelief damages

a man. We do ourselves great harm when we stubbornly refuse to live our lives in a manner pleasing to God. Our pride and self-centeredness strike bitter blows to our relationships, and we suffer. We harm ourselves in so many ways. Our sin is damaging. It's harmful. It brings pain and tears and suffering to our lives.

And as we remain distant from God, we suffer alone when He is willing and ready to be there for us. And so, might it be, might it be, that these words are directed to you this morning? That God is saying to you, don't harm yourself. I am here willing to help and willing to save and willing to heal and willing to restore. What does God do? Well, God speaks words of hope and healing in the jailer's darkest hour. But what else does He do? Well, as we continue considering the account, we can say this. He listens to an answers. The jailer's cry for help. You know, so far it's God who is doing all the running in this matter of saving the jailer. But now, for the first time, the jailer does something. And what does He do?

Well, He cries for help. Then in verse 30, we read these familiar words, He then brought them out and asked. The jailer brought out Paul and Silas into the light, and he asked, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

This is a cry for help. What can we say about this cry for help? Well, it is the cry of a man who has discovered something of the power and glory of God, and it has brought him to his knees. That is how he is physically portrayed to us. He is trembling on his knees. I wonder if this man who asked this question, does he even know what it means to be saved? Does he have a profound and deep and detailed theological understanding of the concept? I'm sure he does not. Does he even realize that this Jesus, of whom Paul and Silas preached, was given that name because He came to save His people from their sins? Did he know that? Difficult to imagine that he did. His thoughts at this moment are, I am sure, very confused. He's almost deranged by this confrontation with the supernatural as it becomes evident to him that this earthquake was no chance occurrence. But one thing he does know is that this God of Paul and Silas is one with whom he must come to terms, a God who can move tectonic plates, a God on whose side he must be. He is sure that this is a God who, he knows not how or why, is interested in him. And maybe this is the most remarkable discovery of all for this jailer.

What about you? I imagine that many who are here this morning know much, much more than the jailer did about who Jesus is and about what He has done for sinners, about what are the steps that He sets out that we are to take that we might be saved. For many of us, these are things that are familiar.

[23 : 46] But I wonder if our great knowledge, perhaps much greater than that of the jailer, thus far leaves us unmoved and crucially dumb. Dumb in the sense that we do not cry out. You do not cry out for help, as this man did. With the little knowledge that he had, it was enough for him to cry out for help. And this is what he needed to do. His cry is a humble, sincere, and urgent cry. He is, as we have noted, on his knees, trembling. And such a cry, such a question will always be heard, and more importantly, will always be answered by God. Test God on this, and discover that it is indeed so. And God listens to the cry of this man. He hears the question, and he provides an answer that is, in God's answer through Paul and Silas, an immediate answer. And then there is a suggestion that that immediate answer becomes a more developed one. What is the immediate answer that the jailer received? Well, they're there clearly set out for us, or it is there clearly set out for us in verse 31. They replied, Paul and Silas replied to this cry for help, this question that the jailer poses with this answer, believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. What does that mean? What is being asked of this man?

Well, as we were thinking last week, as we began to consider Mark's gospel, or the introduction to it, we concluded that it's all about Jesus. And Paul clearly shares that perspective, because in answer to this question, what must I do to be saved? He points the man to Jesus. It's all about Jesus. It's about believing in Jesus. It's about trusting in Jesus. It's about submitting our lives to the Lordship of Jesus, the Lord Jesus. And as that was true in that prison cell in Philippi 2,000 years ago, so it is true this morning in this place. Nothing has changed. But what does it mean to trust in Jesus, to submit our lives to Jesus? Well, no doubt that was further explained and developed by Paul and Silas, as is suggested, or more than suggested, declared there in verse 32. Having given this summary answer, this immediate answer, we then read in verse 32, then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in the house. They were able to develop what it was to believe in Jesus. They were able to explain to him who Jesus is and what Jesus had done. And

what are those necessary elements of understanding that we must have in order to be able to believe in Jesus and to trust in Jesus?

Well, certainly there needs to be in us a recognition of our need, a recognition that we are sinners in need of forgiveness. Now, the intensity with which we appreciate our need may vary greatly from one to another, but there must be a measure of recognition that we stand in need of Jesus. For if there is no recognition of need, clearly we will not go to him for help. But not only is there this requirement that we recognize a need of a Savior, of one who can forgive us, but recognize that in Jesus, in the person of Jesus, there is one able and willing to meet that need and save us from our sin and the consequences of our sin. And this will involve some knowledge, perhaps a very limited knowledge, but some knowledge of who Jesus is, the eternal Son of God, and what he has done, that he died on the cross at Calvary in the place of sinners, taking upon himself the punishment that was our due.

But there must also be, in this trusting and submitting to Jesus, a conscious and deliberate embracing of Jesus as we repent of our sins and trust in him as our Lord and Savior. I'm sure these things, perhaps much more fully and better developed, was the content of this conversation, of this presentation that verse 32 suggests. But back to the jailer. How do we know that he did indeed respond and embrace Jesus? Well, it's interesting. We know that he did not by any words that he utters, but by acts that he performs. And isn't that much more solid evidence to build on? Nothing that he said, or certainly nothing that we're told that he said, but by things that he does. In verse 33, having been given this fuller explanation of who Jesus is and what he must do, what do we read? At that hour of the night, at that hour of the night, having heard, having understood, at that hour of the night, the jailer took them and washed their wounds.

[29 : 04] Which brings us to the next act of God on behalf of the jailer, and it is this. God granted to the jailer, he gifted the jailer repentance and faith. You see, the jailer got his answer, the answer to the question that he posed. But did he do what he had to do? Did he repent?

Did he believe? Well, we're told, to use the language of Paul, that he was indeed granted repentance. And how do we know that he was granted repentance by what we have just noticed? He washed their wounds. There could be no more eloquent testimony to the genuine nature of his repentance. It is Jesus himself who exhorts us to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And as we think about this evidence that this man was indeed saved, that he did indeed embrace Jesus, and as we would suggest that this simple act of healing their wounds, of washing their wounds, is eloquent evidence of his newfound faith, there is perhaps a word that is helpful for those who perhaps struggle not with others posing them the question, are you saved, but who struggle with the question posed inward to ourselves, am I saved? And there are those who struggle with that question, and they ask themselves the question, and they don't know the answer. Well, I would suggest to you that don't be overly concerned with some road to Damascus experience, though that may, in God's providence be his will for you. Don't be overly worried or stressed out about the absence of some memorable mystical encounter with the risen Jesus. Be more concerned with fruit in keeping with repentance. And if you are able to see in your life fruit in keeping with repentance, what greater evidence do you need that you are indeed saved, that God has indeed saved you and placed you in a new place and made you a different person. The jailer is granted this gift of repentance. He is granted also the gift of faith. We know that because we're told. There in verse 34, we're told at the end of the verse, he had come to believe in God. We know that because he makes profession, public profession of his faith, as he is baptized together with his family. And we know that he believed because of one other telling piece of evidence, perhaps the most thrilling piece of evidence, which brings us to the final act of God on behalf of this jailer that we'll consider this morning. God fills this man with joy. He fills this man with joy. That is how it is described for us in verse 34. The jailer brought them into his house.

He set a meal before them. He was filled with joy. Isn't that a wonderful expression, a wonderful description that gives eloquent and conclusive testimony to the fact that this man not only posed a question, not only sought help, but was able to receive the help that he was offered and embrace Jesus as Savior. He was filled with joy. This was a completely new experience for the jailer. This was something he had never experienced before, the joy of forgiveness, the joy of a new affection, the joy of a new life, the joy of a new start and a different future, the joy of knowing God through faith in Jesus. And so many, so many today live their lives searching for joy, groping for joy, running up dead-end alleys of varying descriptions in search of joy, and they discover that joy proves to

have a crushingly mercurial quality. You just can't get hold of it. And of course, the issue is that you can't get joy. By your own efforts, you need to be filled with joy by the ultimate joy giver, who is God himself. God filled this man with joy. He filled his home with joy.

[33 : 44] At sunset, our friend was without hope and without God. By sunrise, he was a disciple of Jesus, saved by the irresistible grace of God and filled with joy. Jesus saves. He saved the jailer, and he can save you.

Let us pray. Let us pray.