

***Words and Deeds: Do Not Pass Go, Do Not Collect \$200***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***February 24, 2019***  
***Genesis 50:14-21; 2 Corinthians 4:7-17; Acts 16:16-40***

Our final Scripture reading comes from Acts 16:16-40. May God add His richest blessing on His holy and sacred Word. "Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved-- you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God -- he and his whole family.

When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace." But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out." The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left.

Monopoly is one of the best-selling games in the world. With editions in over 100 different languages and over 1,100 variations in English, everybody's heard of it, and almost everyone has played some version of it. I'm assuming everyone here has, right? Everybody knows how you go around the board hoping to land on properties no one has purchased yet, attempting to buy up everything in sight before the other players do.

There's one place everybody dreads in the game: jail. In the early portion of the game, going to jail can ruin your chances. Not only did you not get to purchase anything on the turn you go to jail, not only do you not pass "Go" and not collect \$200, you can also wind up there for another three turns. While you're sitting there, everyone else is gobbling up properties. The best strategy is pay your \$50 up front and try to get out as soon as possible.

But there's a surprise in the late game of Monopoly. Once all the properties have been bought up and players have started building houses and hotels, the safest place on the board to be is in jail. When you're sitting in jail, there's no chance of you landing on Boardwalk with a hotel and owing someone else \$2,000. You don't get to move – and that's actually the very best option in the game. It turns out that the longer you sit in jail during the end game, the more likely you are to win. The place you most don't want to be turns out to be your saving grace.

It turns out that it can be that way in the real world, too. The safest place to be is always in the center of God's will, no matter how fierce and furious outside circumstances turn out to be. We remember the disciples out on a boat with Jesus in a fierce storm where the ship is taking on water. They cry out to Him, "Wake up? Don't you care that we are perishing?" And with a word, Jesus calms the storm. Despite the mess they were bailing out of the boat, there was no place safer on Earth than with Jesus.

Today's passage proves much the same. It's an odd story with lots of twists and turns. It proves that God's people are safest doing God's will, even when it means suffering through trials. And it shows that God is unstoppable when He is pursuing someone to bring into His Kingdom. Let's take a few moments and see what God was doing here.

Last week, Paul and Silas arrived in Philippi and met a God-fearing woman there, Lydia, who became host for them and their traveling companions. There was no synagogue in Philippi, so the godly people of the town met out by the river – ceremonial washing was a part of Jewish worship, so meeting by the river made sense. But on one particular day, they encounter a slave girl – and not just any slave girl, but one possessed by a spirit that gave her insight into certain future events. And her owners used this "talent" given by this demon to make a lot of money.

So why does this spirit say what it does? The spirit follows the fellowship around, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." We might think, "Well, that's the truth. Why would a demonic being want to tell the truth?" We might remember that during Jesus' ministry, many spirits that He drove out tried to say who He was; He often commanded them to be silent. They knew the truth and spoke it. Why?

Ultimately, it comes down to the question of who you trust. Is a person with a demonic spirit really trustworthy? They are so adept at lying, even the truth sounds like a lie. This servant girl was yelling at the top of her lungs. Truth? Yes. But done in such a way as to drive people away from Paul and Silas, not to them. This spirit is doing everything it can to thwart their mission – even if by God’s command it is forced to tell the truth.

Several years ago, I went to a Christian concert. It was a big name act...one of the biggest in Christian music at the time. The draw for the concert was Christians. Nobody else really had much reason to go. And in the line, there was a guy going up and down trying to get people to take Bible tracks, little booklets with cartoons and sayings and biblical truths on them, and trying to get people to “come to Jesus.” But it was clear either the guy was clueless as to who all was there for the show, or something else was going on, because he was just kinda creepy. He was the kind of guy that makes you think, “That’s not how we’re supposed to spread the name of Jesus!” This was a supposed Christian all but harassing other Christians about not being Christian like him, I guess.

Surprisingly, Paul and Silas and the rest of them pretty much ignore her. Sounds like a good idea – until she shows up the next day, and the next, and the next. Pretty soon, it becomes clear that this spirit is not going to give up. Finally, out of frustration and exasperation and a disturbed heart at the damage this spirit was doing, Paul commands the spirit out of the girl, and it flees. You might wonder why he didn’t do this in the first place. Jesus and the apostles were known for casting out demons. But that was primarily among the lost sheep of Israel, those who wanted relief and redemption. No one was asking for this girl to be healed.

It’s as if Paul knew what was going to happen next and was trying to avoid or delay it. Because as soon as her owners realize that their profit source is gone, they’re honked off. They drag them before the magistrates of Philippi and blatantly lie about them, saying they are teaching “unlawful customs.” And I’m guessing they had fair warning this might happen, because they are able to gather a crowd really quickly that turns on Paul and Silas.

The magistrates realize they have a mob on their hands and do the safest thing for themselves: they give the mob what it wants. They don’t check any credentials or any evidence. They don’t even think to stop for a moment and find out if these guys are Roman citizens, which affords them the benefit of a trial before punishment and several other perks. They just hear “Jewish” and assume, keep the peace by beating the daylights out of them. Which is what they proceed to do.

Then the magistrates throw them into prison. The jailer is told to guard them carefully, probably for a couple of reasons. First is that they have to sort all this mess out, and they might very well be dangerous. Second is for their own safety, because a large mob is truly a dangerous thing. We all know that everybody’s in trouble when a riot breaks out. So the jailer, doing his job based on what he’s been told, takes them into the deepest part of the prison, almost certain underground, in the inner cell, and fastens their feet in the stocks. What I learned from Dr. Sproul this week is that those kind of stocks were a form of torture device for prisoners; the more you tried to move, the tighter it got around your feet. This looks really bad, because what they’re put through is the kind of torture they put people through before execution.

And yet you can't keep our disciples down. They're singing in the prison at midnight. They're up praying and remember all their favorite hymns. It's so moving, all the other prisoners are listening in. In the middle of what you could genuinely call a hell hole, they are praising God for all He's done. They know the truth we talked about earlier – safest place to be is in the center of God's will. Doesn't matter if that place is prison locked into a torture device. God loves them.

That's something I want us to take home with us into our daily lives. God loves you. *The safest place for you is in the center of God's will.* Learn to love that truth. If you know God loves you and you are where you are supposed to be, doesn't matter so much that the car won't start or the basement's flooded or you're dealing with a chronic illness. God loves you, which matters far more. Praise Him for that love.

Are you going to deal with unfair circumstances in your life? Absolutely. Paul and Silas didn't deserve to be in jail, not in the slightest. They definitely didn't deserve a beating that left them half-dead or to be placed in the torture chamber of the nearby prison. And yet they are singing God's praises. They know that their joy lies beyond their present circumstances. It lies in God, their maker and redeemer and Savior.

Will we find joy in Jesus when life treats us rough? Because it will. In a fallen world, cruel and unusual things happen. We're living our lives out in a world determined to follow its own ways rather than God's ways, and we suffer the consequences. We can decide to curse the darkness. Or we can decide to give thanks and praise to the God who is light, in whom there is no darkness at all, knowing that He cares for us and has plans in place in spite of all the earthly junk that happens to us.

And the major turn in the story illustrates His plans. There is a huge earthquake, enough that the foundations of the prison are moved. The prison doors are opened; the chains are loosed; the stocks are broken. It wakes up the jailer, who is horrified. It's the middle of the night; there's no light; open doors mean there's been a prison break. This is the worst of all possible worlds for the jailer.

He thinks he only has two choices. One is to wait until morning and tell the authorities what happened. But under Roman law, the sentences due to the prisoners are carried out on the jailer. Imagine all those punishments coming down on you. It was considered by the pagan society to be the cowardly choice. The other choice, considered honorable in his pagan society, is to commit suicide. Either way, the jailer is facing death – and from our perspective and the perspective of Paul, it's even worse because he doesn't know the Lord and would face condemnation for his sins in the afterlife.

But that's not the way things go. Paul cries out, "Don't do it! We're all here!" And the jailer knows his life and his soul have been spared. He knows what kind of holy men Paul and Silas are. That night, he's come face to face with death and he knows he is unprepared. "How am I to be saved?" he asks. "Believe in Jesus and you will be saved – you and your whole household," is their reply.

That's exactly what happens. The jailer takes them to his home where his whole family hears the gospel and believes. They're baptized right then and there. The jailer washes their wounds and fixes them a meal – all in the middle of the night! He is overjoyed. One moment, he is literally inches away from death at his own blade. By the morning's light, he is a child of God along with his entire family, saved, redeemed, and made whole. A single moment changes everything.

Now here's what I think we can learn from this incident: *God will not rest until He brings all His people home to His Kingdom – including you and me.* Maybe you've been a believer nearly since you were out of the cradle. Maybe you found Jesus just a short time ago. Maybe you knew something about God and then stumbled in and out of the church until you arrived back here. All of us have an incredible story behind why we're here...and we might not even know it.

This story comes around full circle. Follow the whole thing carefully, and you'll find that an entire household is saved because an evil spirit didn't want people to come to know Jesus and harassed Paul and Silas trying to stop their work. That's absolute proof that Satan never wins. The devil and his minions never succeed at thwarting God's plans. They can do some awful and terrible things, but they are totally and completely ineffective at stopping God from accomplishing His goals. Even the sad possession of this servant girl turns around – she is freed from her spiritual shackles, giving her hope for a future. God allowed her spiritual oppression because a greater good would come out of it.

What's true for the jailer and his family is also true for us. Maybe you haven't seen clearly how God's been at work. I know it was no accident that my family wound up at Southport Presbyterian Church back in 1981, leading us to solid relationships with Jesus Christ rather than trying to "be good," which was what my parents got most of their lives. Had I not had the solid youth group at that church when I was bullied unmercifully in middle school, I might not be here today. God had a plan He was working out in ways I only have the slightest clue about.

What's your story? What's your testimony? Maybe God didn't put a demon-possessed girl in the way of some disciples to get them arrested to get them to a jailer during an earthquake so you could be saved. But God has been working for thousands of years arranging things so that we might know Him today. God loves you so much that He has done that for you. Not only did He send His Son for your sake so that you could be redeemed through faith in Him, He has worked out every detail so that you would know Him and know that love and have that faith.

That praise for God in hard circumstances we talked about earlier? It's not out of blind obligation or duty. No, it's because God's given you a testimony. He has made a way for you where there seemed to be no way. We praise Him because despite how hard life gets, God has provided you with eternal salvation, a security in Jesus no one can take away. I encourage you this week – think about your testimony. Think about the mountains God has moved so you would be a person of faith. Then you'll find the means to give Him praise when things get rough.

My friends, sometimes our lives do get tough. Life isn't fair. Sometimes we do not get to pass go or collect \$200. We get sent to proverbial jail on the whim of a Chance card. But God is there. Stand on the rock of Jesus, who died for you, who loves you, whose Spirit is with you even now. Stand on the testimony of all He's done to bring you home to His Father. And we will rejoice together, knowing that for all we face now, the Kingdom to come will be worth it.