

WHO IS THE REAL PRISONER?

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ January 10, 2016

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴ 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. (Acts 16:25-34)

This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

One common theme in the Bible that repeats itself again and again is: appearances can be deceiving. The prime example of that theme is Jesus on the cross - for all the world to see it looks like Jesus has been defeated. But appearances can be deceiving - by hanging there on that cross Jesus was in fact victorious. But the Bible does not hold a monopoly on that theme, you can find it in the world today. One such example is man named Viktor Frankl.

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who survived the death camps of Nazi Germany. While he was in the death camps he came to the realization that he alone had the freedom and power to determine his response to the horrors of the situation. By controlling his response to the situation he became an inspiration for others around him, both the prisoners and also the guards. If someone were to look at Viktor Frankl, they might wonder, WHO IS THE REAL PRISONER?

A similar type of occurrence took place in our lesson from the book of Acts this morning. If you were to look at the two men - Paul and Silas - chained and beaten but singing hymns and praying, you may have wondered WHO ARE THE REAL PRISONERS? Even though much of the focus in the account is drawn towards Paul and Silas, the real focus is on a different sort of prisoner, with a different sort of captivity. It is something we have all be imprisoned by and is a question that needs to be asked to ourselves, WHO IS THE REAL PRISONER?

1. Saved by an earth-shaking miracle
2. Nourished with life-giving food

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It all happened because of some dream that Paul had when they were in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. He and Silas wondered where God wanted them to go next on this mission journey

that took place around 50AD. Paul saw a vision of a Macedonian man calling for them to come with the gospel. And so Paul and Silas journeyed across the Aegean Sea into Greece. What did this get them? It got them thrown in prison.

There they were in Philippi, a retirement town for Roman veterans, and Paul had gone down to the river to talk to a few woman, one of whom was named Lydia. Lydia welcomed Paul and his companions into her home and allowed them to use her home as a home base of sorts as he preached the gospel. Somewhere along the way, Paul garnered the attention of a slave girl, but not just any slave girl. A slave girl who, while possessed by a demon, was able to share the future. As you can imagine, this girl earned her owners a lot of money. Paul, being the nice guy he is, and not wanting demon-possessed woman singing his praises, cast the demon out of her. This had the unfortunate effect of making her owners mad, and they promptly stirred up a riot against Paul and actually convinced the rulers of the town to flog them and throw them into the deepest cell in the local jail.

They warned the jailer how dangerous these men were and to watch them closely. The jailer, probably not knowing better, happily obliged and showed no care or concern as he shackled them and dragged them to their cell. That probably happened sometime in the early afternoon. Do you remember what time it was when the account from the book of Acts took place? **“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.”** So for the better part a day, Paul and Silas had been locked in a cell and probably chained to a wall or some other stationary object. It was dark, very dark, little chance of getting any sleep. But what were Paul and Silas doing? Were they crying and complaining about their lot in life? No! They were singing and praying. What faith they had in the Lord their God even in such a circumstance as this. It may have led some to wonder WHO IS THE PRISONER?

Then a violent earthquake came, not unusual given the geography of the area. But this was God using an earthquake for his purpose. The very foundations of the prison shook, the doors tore off their hinges, and the chains that bound the prisoners came loose. Given the situation, Paul and Silas could have thought this was God breaking them out of jail, much like he had done for Peter in Acts 12. But they stayed put, but not because they were scared of the dark. But because God had in mind to save THE REAL PRISONER through an earth-shaking miracle.

The earthquake had woken the jailer of the prison. And he trembled in fear as he trudged down to the prison and saw the doors ajar. It was too dark to see inside, but all seemed lost. He had been tasked with the care of these prisoners, but now they were gone. The only honorable thing left for him to do was to fall on his sword and die. But a voice cried out from the darkness, **“Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”** Could this be the voice of the dangerous criminal they had put into his custody just this afternoon? The man who acted like no other prisoner he had met - he did not curse, he did not cry, he was not obstinate. He called for lights and saw that it was as the man had said.

Just imagine the gamut of emotions the jailer went through in a matter of moments - startled, terrified, surprised, ecstatic. And at the moment he brought Paul and Silas out of their cell, Luke describes another emotion - trembling. These emotions had taken a toll on the jailer, who had been prepared to meet his maker. At such a time like this Paul was unusually calm and

composed, and so the jailer asked the most important question anyone could ask: **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”**

This was not the question of someone asking to do some great work to save himself. If it were, Paul would have had a different answer. He would have given a response akin to that which Jesus gave the rich, young man showing that heaven cannot be earned. No, this was a question of a man shaken to the core, a man who knew his inability to change his circumstance, a man who needed to hear the news of the gospel, and that’s exactly what Paul gave - **“Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved!”** It took an earth-shaking miracle to free the jailer, WHO WAS THE REAL PRISONER.

Another earth-shaking miracle happened just about 30 minutes ago - did you feel it? It was not an earthquake the likes of in Philippi, but the miracle was just as great. It was Roman’s baptism you just witnessed - God worked another earth-shaking miracle right before your eyes. It’s true, Roman didn’t consent to be baptized, he didn’t “accept” Jesus into his heart, he didn’t “do” anything, but then again, Roman didn’t have to, besides, Roman couldn’t. Instead, through simple water connected with God’s Word, the Holy Spirit came and planted the seed of faith in Roman’s heart - not potential faith, actual faith. It’s there just as surely as he is breathing.

The same God who breathes out the stars and makes the earth quake, the same God who can raise people from the dead, can and does certainly work through baptism. And through that miracle of baptism, God connected him with another baptism, a baptism that we heard about this morning in our gospel, that is the baptism of Jesus. The book of Hebrews records that Jesus was **“made like his brothers in every way,”** and Corinthians records, **“we were buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God.”** It was the earth-shaking miracle he needed to free him from his bondage.

He needed it because as cute as he is, HE WAS A REAL PRISONER - a prisoner to sin. Like King David, he was a sinner from the time of his conception, because he was born of two sinful parents. It was the same for all of us, we were held prisoner because of our sins. Sometimes we get this mistaken idea that we can control our sins because it’s something we do - we can control how much we curse, control how much we get angry, control how much we worry. But in reality, it is the sin that controls us. And **“everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”** It doesn’t matter if you’re an adult, it doesn’t matter if you’re an infant, you’re equally a slave to sin, you’re equally dead to sin.

And so now you realize the significance of this earth-shaking miracle called baptism and how it connects us to this earth-shaking Savior. Because he literally shook the earth when he rose from the grave. He shook us from death to life. The apostle Paul records, **“When you were dead in your sins...God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins.”** The earth-shaking miracle that saved Roman, is the same earth-shaking miracle that saves you also.

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But that’s not the end of the story. The physical prisoners were brought out of the jail by the one WHO WAS THE REAL PRISONER - the jailer. The jailer had just been freed from his spiritual

prison cell by the earth-shaking miracle, but that was not all. He brought Paul and Silas out of the prison and into his own home and set a meal before them. But this wasn't the most significant food eaten that night. Rather, it was THE REAL PRISONER who was nourished with life-giving food. Paul and Silas **“spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.”** It was this food of the Word of God that caused the jailer and his whole family to be baptized and rejoice, to rejoice that Jesus came for all. Paul's very purpose on his mission journey was to spread this news, that Jesus was not just for the Jews, but for all people.

Because while we have been connected with Jesus through our baptisms, baptism is not just a magic formula that makes us set for life. Just like a little seed needs food and water, just like little Roman needs milk, so also the seed of faith, planted in baptism needs to be nourished - nourished with life-giving food. With no food, faith can soon be snuffed out. The jailer received his food from the Word of God preached to him and his faith was strengthened. This is where we receive our food from as well.

One of the passages I am always reminded of is from Romans where God writes, **“Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ.”** It is a great reminder for me, and it should be for you also of the importance of hearing the Word of Christ. The Word of Christ is what nourishes our souls. We wouldn't dream of going days without physical food to nourish us, so we shouldn't even be content to just receive God's Word here on Sunday. For the less we hear God's Word, the less we are nourished by live-giving food, the quicker we return to that jail cell our sins trapped us in.

I don't know about you, but I can find it incredibly difficult to get into God's Word just when I have time for it. Which is why I need to constantly remind myself to set time for it. Just like anything else we must be proactive in setting aside time to be nourished by life-giving food, and not just you, but your whole family too. If you're not proactive about it, it likely won't get done. But when it becomes a habit, it gets done.

Appearances can be deceiving in your life as well. Life may seem to be great - family is great, job is great, friends are great. But if God is not present, life is anything but great, no matter how much it may look and feel great. Or appearances could be deceiving in the other way too. Life may not seem to be great - family is a mess, out of work, no friends. But if God is present, how can life not be great, no matter how much it may not look and feel great? Appearances may be deceiving in a simple baptism, it may not look like anything special at first glance, until you realize what an earthshaking miracle it is. May we nourish this saving faith with life-giving food. Because we know what we need to “do” to be saved: **“Believe in the Lord Jesus!”** Amen.