

Next week marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, which was a radical movement started by people like Luther, Calvin and in Scotland John Knox. Up to 1517, there had been two main forms of Christianity, Orthodox Christianity which was mainly in Russia and Greece, and Roman Catholicism in the west. Catholic just means universal, and the church was controlled by the Pope and Cardinals in Rome. Unfortunately, these Cardinals had completely lost the doctrine that faith could only come through God's grace, and they were telling people that if they paid money, or served the church in a certain way then they would enter heaven, which was nonsense.

Martin Luther in Germany, finally had enough of this and he started a movement that led a protest against the church in Rome, and those who followed Luther, people like John Calvin in Geneva, Zwingli in Zurich and John Knox in Scotland started to reform the church and out of this reforming, or reformation came Christians who were protesting against the abuses of the church of Rome, and they became Protestants and we follow in their footsteps today. That is why it's important that we mark the anniversary of the Reformation.

And what all this got to do with Acts 16? Well not much, other than Luther, Calvin and Knox were radical in their faith and they risked persecution for their faith. This presents a parallel with Acts 16 which tells of the Apostle Paul, who was imprisoned for his radical faith. He was jailed for nothing more than being of Jewish origin, and preaching God's word. He shocked people by radically dislodging culture from its historic moorings. And similar to Luther, Calvin and Knox, Paul ushered in a change in the culture of his day. And like the Reformers who discovered religious freedom, Paul discovered joy and freedom in a prison cell. Two Christians; Paul and Silas are imprisoned behind stone walls but they're not depressed or dejected. They are singing; and they are singing and praising God by belting out glorious hymns of joy to Him.

The jailors were shocked! Joy in prison, prisoners singing when they may be facing death? What did Paul and Silas have to rejoice about? How could these doomed men find the spirit to sing in jail?

To answer this question, we need to start at the beginning: Paul and Silas were continuing their missionary work and their first stop was the Roman colony at Philippi. A small number of Jews lived at Philippi and anti-semitism was rampant. Since there was no synagogue in Philippi, Paul and Silas preached to a small group of women at an outdoor prayer meeting. One woman named Lydia, was converted and she along with her family was baptized. After preaching to Lydia and the other women, Paul and Silas entered Philippi and soon became the centre of attention, not just because of their preaching. They were followed by a fortune teller who was demon possessed and she followed them everywhere shouting; *These men are servants of the most high God who proclaimed to us the way of salvation*. Obviously, this attracted considerable attention and she was giving Paul and Silas free publicity which would have been helpful if they had been in a different city, but not in this Philippi! This was publicity only meant trouble for Paul and Silas.

For Paul and Silas, to have a possessed slave girl screaming in the streets did little to establish good public relations or build up their credentials. The Philippians were simple and superstitious and they accepted what they saw at face value. The people of Philippi had no concept of spiritual warfare that many Christians have today, and they didn't recognise that this poor girl was under spiritual attack, that she was possessed. They believed that demons or false gods which are the same thing, had invaded certain people, and gave predictions of the future through possessed people. Of course, what this troubled girl was saying was true, but her words were not inspired by God. Satan was using this poor girl to try and discredit Paul and Silas.

But God was with Paul and he could discern the difference between the words of the fortune teller, and the authentic proclamation of one gifted with prophecy from the Holy Spirit. Paul wanting to make the girl well, performed the miracle of exorcism and drove the demon out of her.

What Paul did not know was that men who owned the slave girl, were making a handsome profit from her fortune telling, and they were outraged by their sudden loss of revenue. They had Paul and Silas arrested and charged with inciting a riot. Philippi was a Roman city and all the judge had to hear was that Paul and Silas were Jews and his prejudice prompted him to sentence them to be beaten and then thrown into prison. And this concludes the first act of the drama recorded in Acts 16. The second act begins as Paul and Silas are confined to jail, not because of their Christian faith but because they'd been born Jews.

Around midnight in the damp darkness of their cell and shackled in chains, they could still use their voices to sing hymns of joy and praise to God. Their voices echoed through the halls of the Roman prison, which awoke their prison guard from his sleep. Their singing was so vibrant that the guard thought they were making the walls, floors and doors vibrate! Suddenly, the guard realised that it was not the singing that was causing the lantern above him to swing, it was an earthquake!

The very foundation of the prison was shaken. The locks of the doors sprung open, and the iron gates burst loose from the beams. The bolts holding the chains in the walls fell out, and the Paul and Silas were free. When the guard saw that his prisoners had escaped, he panicked. He knew that he would face punishment for allowing the prisoners to escape so he drew his sword, preparing to commit suicide which was preferable to facing a severe and agonizing death at the hands of his superiors.

Paul cried out to him, *Do not harm yourself, for we are here!* The guard looked up and he noticed that none of the prisoners had escaped. They were all standing around Paul and Silas, free but making no attempt to escape. The jailor fell to his knees in front of Paul and he cried out to Paul that life changing question: *What must I do to be saved?* Paul answered him: *Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved: You and your household!* The guard asked forgiveness for his sins, accepted Jesus as his Lord and then he and his family were baptized. If we look beyond the limits of our text in Acts 16; we learn that the guard and his family, Lydia and her family; and the freed prisoners who came to faith through Paul and Silas' witness; formed the nucleus of a strong church which grew and flourished in Philippi. Paul wrote to this church and we know this letter as Philippians. This letter from Paul expressed so much love and encouragement. *Out of great adversity and persecution, God brought great blessings.*

The earth was still quaking from the resurrection: Jesus Christ was becoming the cornerstone the church which changed the course of history and the destiny of millions. What was it that enabled Paul and Silas sing hymns of praise and joy in a Philippian prison? They could sing because they were before all else, prisoners of Christ. And to be captured by Christ is to know a freedom that can't be taken away by anything in life. To live in Christ is to live with a freedom that no walls can enclose or prison confine.

Professor Grensted of Oxford University was a man of great faith. When he wrote or lectured on Jesus Christ, he spoke of Christ as having no limits, and he used the analogy of limitless space to demonstrate his point. Grensted would mention the spaciousness of his garden in his lectures; he loved his garden! One day he invited several of his students to tea in his garden. When they entered the garden, they expected to see acres of trees, shrubs, vast lawns and flower beds. They were shocked to find a tiny walled-in garden no more than twelve feet square!

Seeing the surprise on the faces of his students, the professor remarked: *You are surprised at the smallness of my garden! True, it is not very long or wide; but, just look up. There is no limit to the height of my garden. It reaches up to the very heart of God in heaven.* The prisons that enslave people and their minds have walls, floors and ceilings. However, it's the confines of our minds that truly imprison us. Paul constantly referred to himself as a prisoner of the love and the grace of Christ. But he could sing hymns of joy and praise to God because he understood that life in Christ has no walls or ceilings. Once you have committed your life to Christ, your life takes on a dimension of height that reaches into the very heart of God in heaven.

We may feel fenced in by life. Tragic circumstances and troubles may wall us in. Distress and depression can confine us just as a prison does, and our opportunities may appear to make life limited. But if we live in Christ then these things are just illusions, and temporary illusions at that. So, take hope and rejoice in Christ.

Learn what Paul and Silas discovered sitting in their prison cell. In Christ, nothing in this world can create walls or ceilings that can separate us from the love of God. Nothing in this world can limit the height of our lives. In Christ Jesus, life is as vast and as high as heaven itself. Therefore, let us sing with Paul and Silas. Rejoice and sing praise to our gracious and limitless Lord. *Amen!*

Let's Pray:

(1712 words)