

Surprised by Joy: Chains & Bars

Acts Chapter 16 Verse 11-34

Pastor David Woolverton

¹¹ So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the^[a] district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. ¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. ¹⁴ One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

¹⁶ As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸ And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. ²⁰ And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. ²¹ They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ²⁶ and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ And the jailer^[b] called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. ³⁴ Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

According to international statistics, over 5,900 Christians were killed because of their faith in Jesus Christ. In addition to that, according to our statistics, just last year, close to 5,100 churches were either attacked or burned or destroyed, and in 2021, 4,765 followers of Jesus were detained or imprisoned or held on trial in a mock fashion, all because of their faith and what they proclaimed about Jesus Christ. Wow. 360 million followers of Jesus in the globe today. 360 million are living in parts of our world where they are persecuted or discriminated against because of their faith. Think about that... 360 million. That's globally speaking, one out of every 7 believers in Jesus. Most of us in the United States have no concept of what persecution is all about. In fact, from that vantage point, we have things pretty darn good here. We are pretty safe, but globally speaking, there are believers in Jesus today who are behind bars, who are held in chains, who are imprisoned just because they said yes to Jesus.

My name is David Woolverton, and I'm one of the pastors here at St Paul's Church. We have begun a new sermon series on the book of Philippians. In the past couple of weeks, we have been talking through what background, what dimension Paul had in writing this very impactful letter. And I believe that behind the words of this letter, we will be *surprised by joy*. Paul's joy, for sure, but also the joy of the Lord, regardless of our circumstances. We must remember that the Apostle Paul wrote this letter from prison, and he was in prison because of what he believed, because of his proclamation of the good news. And ironically, that good news was about freedom, about hope, and about new life. That very message got him beaten to the point of death many times, nearly stoned to death on several occasions, and imprisoned multiple times. And yet Paul had the unique ability to see beyond his present circumstances. Listen to the words that he writes in the first chapter, starting at verse 12. *Now, I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the Gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the Gospel without fear.* Did you hear that? Paul is writing from prison and even in the midst of his dire circumstances, he has a view of what is yet to come. I really believe that these few verses tell the story of character traits that help Paul navigate the tough waters of his circumstances. Through it all, he gives us hope and challenges us to be faithful in our following of Jesus, regardless of our circumstances. For example, I really believe that that Paul embodies the character trait of intentionality. He's intentional. Paul clearly was intentional despite being behind his bars and in chains. Paul the Apostle kept his view on what God wanted to accomplish. And nothing - no bars, no chains, no stoning was going to keep him from Him. From carrying out that call to share the good news of the gospel. Paul was very intentional. Everything he did, no matter how difficult, was for the purpose of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Can you imagine that even in prison, his view of life was bigger than his moment? Also, secondly, he was courageous. He didn't let his circumstances prevent him from realizing that lives were at stake, souls were at stake. The power behind what Paul did and why he did what he did was all for a greater cause. He was pursuing people for the sake of establishing a relationship between them and the God who He knew and believed with all his heart. He had the capacity to build a new bridge to a new hope and a new life. He was courageous. Can you imagine what he went through? The stories that we read about in the Book of Acts, the letters that he wrote to fellow believers, he wrote many of them after having been beaten, imprisoned, or starved. And yet he was fed with a message and a hope that far transcended his current circumstances. So, he was intentional, and he was courageous. He was also faithful. Paul embodied faithfulness to Jesus, and no matter his circumstances, as we have been describing, Paul's faithfulness transcended all of that. He was not going to let anything keep him from loving God and loving the people that God had called him to be serving. What made this difficult for Paul is that some of the people that he was called to love were far from what we would consider today to be lovable. They were individuals who hated his message, hated

him, hated what he represented, and did not believe in what Paul was ready to live or die for. Would we do that? Paul was intentional. He was courageous. And he was faithful to Jesus no matter what.

I really believe that as we face into our current circumstances, most of us followers of Jesus were not going to be imprisoned because of what we believe. We're not going to be persecuted. We're not going to be killed. We're not going to be stoned to death. We're not going to be maligned in ways that that really forced us to face life or death moments in our culture, especially in America. And yet many of us, many of us in our world are still behind bars or we're still handcuffed to principles, principalities, ways of life that keep us from experiencing the full range of hope and new life that God would have for us. What about us? What about you? What chains or what bars are keeping you from experiencing the fullness of the life that God has in store for us? Maybe for us we can take the lessons of the Apostle Paul. Maybe what we're learning from this passage and from the entire letter is that God wants to surprise us with joy. He wants to give us the gift of that new life that he's called us to experience. And so, He invites us to be intentional, to discover our purpose in life, a purpose that God has ordained for us, a purpose that could be as simple as loving people who may be different from us or loving individuals that we would normally classify as unlovable.

What would that look like for you to be intentional every single day? Getting up in the morning and asking God, what is it that you want me to be or to do today, to bring glory to you, and to shine as an ambassador of hope and new life? Lord, who do you want me to love today? And maybe in addition to being intentional, maybe some of us are going to be asked to be courageous, to face into situations that we would not normally want to face into. You know, when we pray at the beginning of our day, Lord, who do you want me to meet? Where do you want me to go? What is it that that is going to be bigger than my agenda? Because I'm tuning into your agenda, Lord. Then He's going to actually take our prayer seriously, and he's going to introduce us to people that we may not have been aware of or put us into situations that are going to require us to be confident in who we are in faith and to go where God leads us, trusting that He's going to give us whatever we need for the moment. But we've got to be courageous. Courage is not the absence of fear, as has been said by many people before me. It's the willingness to take a step in faith and go because we trust the God who has called us to being intentional, being courageous. Will we be faithful to Jesus Christ? This is where the rubber hits the road for many of us. It's literally asking ourselves; do we really want to live out what we say we believe? Therein lies the challenge. Will we be faithful to Jesus no matter what? You know, many of us in our culture right now, as I indicated, we're not going to face severe persecution, but as we learned last week, we are not to be Christians in isolation. We need to pray, to pray for the opportunities, to love, to give hope, and to remember that our intentionality, our courage, and our faith with Jesus connects us with believers not only in the present time, but all of those believers since the very beginning of the church who put their lives on the line for what they believed.

What do you believe? And are you willing to be intentional? Courageous? And faithful? Let's pray together. God, I thank you for meeting us in the midst of our prisons, whether they are real prisons with real bars or prisons of our own making. The good news of Jesus Christ is the news about setting us free, breaking the chains, and announcing the release of all people to a new day and a new hope that you have created and provided. Thank you, Lord, for what you are doing. Help us by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to always be intentional, to stir within us a courage that goes above and beyond anything that we have on our own as we seek to be faithful to the Lord who has called us, and the One who has died for us so that we might have life. Thank you, Lord. We love you, and we thank you for loving us first. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.

I want to publicly thank the Elizabethtown Police Department and Chief Ed Cunningham, who graciously welcomed us. I want to say that their accommodations were great, but I don't know that I ever want to experience that for real. It was very daunting, especially as I was being handcuffed and as I heard that door of the cell close. Many of us take for granted the freedoms that we have and many of us will never know the pain of persecution, but also, many of us still have the things that hold us in prison. A personal prison. We want you to know that we're praying for you. And if that is true for you, we invite you to reach out to us. We want you to discover the joy that the Lord has for you. Never, never, ever hold back. That invitation is for you. Also, I want to say thank you to the two young people that you saw reading Scripture; a 14-year-old and a 16-year-old – both cousins of my wife, Christine, who happened to be visiting us that day. And so, I said, hey, I'm recording a sermon - I'd love for you to be a part of it. And to their credit, they immediately said, we're in! Little did they know that I had in mind putting them behind prison bars. So, kudos to them! It was very much appreciated.