

Rev. Seth D. Bode † Sermon 408, 01-10-2021 † Epiphany 1

“Lord God, you have appointed me as pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

ACTS 16

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. Instantly all the doors were opened, and everyone’s chains came loose. ²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw that the prison doors were opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, because he thought that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted with a loud voice, “Don’t harm yourself, because we are all here!” ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling in front of Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

³¹ They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.” ³² They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to everyone in his home. ³³ At the same hour of the night, he took them and washed their wounds. Without delay, he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴ Then he brought Paul and Silas into his house and set food before them. He rejoiced, because he and his whole household had come to believe in God.



No one ever said that the Christian faith is safe.

It was one of the coolest feelings. It was my first year in Orange County, southern California; and we were in the middle of a Bible information class. I was allowed to teach the Word to new believers, and it was a moment of clarity, after I said something important, when God added in a little California ‘punctuation.’ All of a sudden, there was a tremor, and it gave us the feeling that the floor was rolling underneath us. It lasted for a few seconds, and then stopped. How exciting. How unsafe.

This earthquake was God's gift to me. It wasn't a big one, but I wouldn't call it safe. No one ever said that the Christian faith is safe. But important changes come from unsafe situations. In fact ...

Singing The Christian Faith Opens Doors

1. Prison doors

We see risk, danger, and an unsafe environment in our lesson today in the book of Acts, as Paul and Silas sang hymns and prayed prayers in prison. And their songs and prayers were punctuated with an earthquake.

Paul and Silas were singing hymns after suffering—wrongful suffering. How did they get in prison? They had arrived at Philippi and began to speak the message when a demon-possessed girl shouted after them through the streets. So they cast out the demon. Her slave-owners were upset because she had been fortune-telling for profit with the power of this demon. So her owners had Paul and Silas whipped and beaten up and thrown into prison. See how unsafe the Christian faith is?

Their singing was ongoing, into the middle of the night. You can put a Christian under lock and key, but you cannot safely lock up God's Word. He will destroy all human security. Safety and security don't come from physical chains, just as chaining up our lives in human rules leads to destruction.

I don't know if they were singing "*the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*"; "*remember your mercy, O Lord, remember your mercy and love*"; "*the mighty Lord is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress*"; "*surely it is God who saves me, I will trust in Him and not be afraid*"; "*sing to the Lord a new song, for He has done marvelous things*"; "*Happy the people the Lord has chosen to be His own*"; "*the Lord is my strength and my song*" ...

I do know that the prisoners overheard them, and that they were really listening. I do know that God was also listening. God acted for them. He punctuated their prayers and hymns with an earthquake at just the right time in the middle of the night. He used that earthquake to shake open the doors and shackles of the prison.

Is that safe? I'd suggest it could be dangerous and unhealthy. Our best guess is that in this earthquake, God miraculously protected these prisoners and their bodies.

God can protect human bodies from natural disasters, from diseases, and from suffering. In fact, we can be sure that God can cause these things, while we are in the middle of them, to strengthen our Christian faith and to keep us gathering and singing.

2. Hidden doors

But you might say, wait just a minute. Nothing is so awful as this earthquake. It ruined a man's life. Not because it was dangerous, but because it freed the prisoners. For the jailer, open jail cells meant punishment. He didn't know who had escaped, but he knew the penalty. He was about to "*do himself in*" (27) with his own sword. Suicide was considered the noble and customary way out in this situation, because it was better than punishment for letting prisoners free. Yet even this proved to be an open door.

Some of God's most powerful miracles are life-ruiners: for instance, the Ten Plagues. Dealings of divine providence bring the law to bear. Devils and disasters are some powerful sermons. God preaches those sermons loudly—as loud as an earthquake. But they are also entirely LAW sermons.

God's Law tells us we are sinners. It works hypocrisy or despair—here, despair. As long as the law was in charge, the jailer's life was over. The prison was hidden in the heart of the jailer. He was locked up in human insecurity and desperation.

Through hardship and tragedy, God forces all human beings to this kind of thought. He doesn't always use an earthquake. But sooner or later he wants to bring us to the hopeless sense that nothing is safe, and everything is eternally lost. But God doesn't want us to shift the blame. True desperation happens not when we're afraid of consequences, but when we know IT WAS OUR SINS that are consequential. True desperation drives us to try and fix things. "*What must I do to be saved?*" But actions are no good to a God who can move mountains.

This is how God opens doors. They are hidden doors in the heart. His law works in human hearts to push out human security. His law convicts sinners of their inability to save. Then there is room for the gospel—then God walks miracles right through those hidden doors of the heart. His most impressive miracles are not earthquakes or freeing prisoners, but they are comforting words. The word “BELIEVE” is the greatest event in this lesson. Ask a law question, you expect a law answer—to hear what you must do. Instead Paul and Silas offer a gospel answer, as they say, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.” The gospel finds you; God finds you with the gospel.

Then we see another person rejoicing and ringing with joy: the jailer. Living in the gospel isn't something you keep to yourself. Jesus' name is immediately connected to life, so it is immediately connected to living—living in joy and not fear. I can give you examples of the jailer's joy.

1. For one, he invited his household members to hear the gospel.
2. Next, he washed the prisoners' wounds.
3. Then, without delay, he and his whole family were washed from sin in baptism.
4. Next, he fed Paul and Silas, the first church breakfast in Philippi.
5. Finally, it would seem the singing was not over.

The jailer rejoiced. Singing the Christian faith caused more rejoicing. James 5:13 says, “*Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.*” (See also Eph. 5:18b-20.)

Singing the Christian faith opens doors. We know Paul eventually writes an epistle to this city from Rome, and it is called Philippians. So who were the Philippians? We would expect at least one household is that of the jailer. These prison doors opened the doors of a whole church.

Don't let anyone tell you that the Christian faith is safe. The last earthquake I felt in California was in Easter of 2010. My little brother was visiting and we were driving, and if you know earthquakes, you know it's harder to feel them riding on tires filled with air. You need to be standing on solid ground. It's when your feet are not grounded on Scripture that you don't feel the impact. But if you are standing on the promises of God—standing on the solid ground of God's Word, standing in the waters that washed you clean—then the Word is so dangerous it can leave a sinner shaken, broken open, and ready for the gospel, filled with faith; in Jesus' name, Amen.