

## Faith in a Dungeon

Acts 16:16-34

June 2, 2019

We find many unexpected things happen in life. Sometimes we find money on the street, or have an unexpected visit from a friend or family. Sometimes we receive an unanticipated recognition, praise or promotion. Sometimes unexpected events can be much more serious, such as illness, a job loss or the loss of a loved one. Depending on the event, we can experience either exhilaration or great stress.

Today, let us think about how we, as Christians, should respond in stressful situations. What should be an appropriate faith response to stressful situations in life?

Our story begins with Paul and Silas encountering a slave girl who was possessed by a spirit of divination. She was able to foretell future events. By providing fortune-telling service, she earned a lot of money for her owners. This girl followed Paul and Silas, shouting “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” She did this for several days to the point that it made Paul and Silas very uncomfortable. So, Paul commanded the spirit to come out of her in the name of Jesus Christ, and the spirit left her. She was not able to predict the future any more.

When the slave girl’s owners realized that she was not able to make money for them anymore, they brought charges against Paul and Silas. A mob gathered supporting the owners. At this sign of unrest, the magistrates of the city ordered them to be stripped and beaten without a proper trial. After they were severely beaten, they were thrown into prison. Paul and Silas were unfairly accused, punished, jailed and chained.

In moments like these, we would raise a question or complaint against God saying, “Why me? Why is this happening? Do I deserve this? All I did was deliver her from a spirit-possession.” I could be bitter and have resentment, but that is not what Paul and Silas did. Instead they turned a difficult situation into an opportunity. Let’s see if we can learn something from them.

Let us look at their attitude, their actions, and their impact in this situation.

First, let us look at their attitude. The author of the Book of Acts tells us that about the midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Can you imagine what kind of attitude and

faith they had? Instead of being bitter or whining to God to rescue them, they were praying and singing the songs of praise.

Our lives are much easier than theirs. Yet many of us do not have that kind of faith, do we? We worry when sickness strikes us or when someone we love is in distress. With rising costs and diminishing assets, we wonder with fear what lies ahead. Will we have enough resources to sustain us? Are we going to make it to the end of the tunnel?

In life, we can have our own prison experience of worrying about our marriage, children, job, or health. In the middle of your prison experience, are we able to sing praises to God? Maybe we should.

Have you ever heard of “Biofeedback Therapy”? Biofeedback therapy is a type of training program with the goal of teaching patients to control involuntary physiological processes. It is a mind–body training technique in which individuals learn how to modify their physiology for the purpose of improving physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.<sup>1</sup> The experts in this field tell us that when we express a positive action, it produces a positive emotion. They say, it is not that people smile because they feel good; they smile because it makes them feel good.

According to a study at Wake Forest University, singing aloud is one of those positive actions that can increase a feeling of well-being. So, when you are depressed, when it seems everything seems to fall apart, when you are about to lose hope, force yourself to break out in a song, especially a joyful song.

I am sure this was not the reason that Paul and Silas sang in their situation. They were singing to express their confidence in God, but those songs were a witness to the other prisoners.

While John Wesley and his brother Charles were traveling from London to Georgia on a ship in a mission in 1736, there was a terrible storm. All the passengers, including John and Charles Wesley and the crews feared for their lives. But the one exception was a small group of Moravian missionaries from Germany. They were calm and unafraid of death. During the entire storm they were singing hymns and praising God. It was a powerful witness for the Wesley brothers.

After two years of failed ministry in Georgia, the Wesley brothers returned home in London. They began to have fellowship with the Moravian community in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://draxe.com/biofeedback-therapy/>

London, and later it was in the Moravian church on Aldersgate street where John Wesley had the Aldersgate experience, the “warming of the heart” experience.

All this happened because Wesley had been inspired by the singing of some Moravians.<sup>2</sup> Singing in a storm, in a prison, or in various prisons of life can be a mighty witness.

The second thing we notice is Paul and Silas’ actions. Paul and Silas were praying and singing. Their actions demonstrated that they trusted God and they had a great compassion for people. Paul and Silas were praying; but we don’t know what they were praying for. Did they ask God to deliver them from the prison? Or did they ask God to use them even in that situation? We will never know. However, we can ask this question. If they had asked for their release, why didn’t they escape when they had a chance?

Maybe they were concerned about the jailor. Maybe they wanted to know how God would use them. When they were arrested, the jailor was ordered to guard them carefully. That is why he put Paul and Silas in chains. He wanted to make sure no one would or could escape. If they escaped, he would be in a great trouble. So, he secured them in chains, but when the earthquake happened and all the doors were opened and the chains broke loose, the jailor assumed that all the prisoners had escaped. He knew that suicide would be better than being executed. So, he tried to kill himself, but Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

Interesting thing is that we can assume that Paul and Silas stayed because they were more concerned for the jailor than for themselves. We can further assume that they stayed because they knew that God could use them even in that situation. How about other prisoners? There were other prisoners. Our passage says that when Paul and Silas were praying and singing “other prisoners were listening to them.” Why didn’t they escape? Did Paul and Silas convince them not to escape? Or perhaps the other prisoners were so shocked by the fact that the earthquake happened while Paul and Silas were praying and singing and by the strong magnitude of the earthquake that they could not move. We don’t know for sure. We will never know why they didn’t escape.

However, when this jailor saw the actions and attitude of Paul and Silas, he could see they were special people. He wanted to have what they had. People

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Russell B. Smith, [http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/rus\\_smith/NT.smith.colossians.1.1-13.html](http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/rus_smith/NT.smith.colossians.1.1-13.html).

notice when they see the attitude and actions of genuine Christians. They get infected by them. You and I can infect the people around us by the way we live.

Most of you are here because you were exposed to someone who did their best to live like Jesus. You saw something in their attitude and actions that made you say, “I want what they have.”

In this United Methodist Church, we say that our mission is to make disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world. I am sure we can make some impact in transforming the world by changing national and institutional policies. But real impact is made when each of us live with the attitude and actions that resembles that of Christ.

So, let me ask you. Would your attitude and actions cause someone to want to be a follower of Jesus Christ? Being an effective witness of Christ is to live our lives with faith and to demonstrate that faith regardless of our circumstances. People around us are listening and watching us with a hope that they will find something they want in us.