

Acts 16:25-34

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly 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. ²⁷When 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. ²⁸But Paul shouted with a loud voice, "Don't harm yourself, because we are all here!"

²⁹The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling in front of Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household." ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to everyone in his home. ³³At the same hour of the night, he took them and washed their wounds. Without delay, he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴Then 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.

Shaken

I.

He was comfortable with the gods he had chosen. What was there, really, to be *uncomfortable* about? Society had defined dozens, perhaps even hundreds or thousands of gods. His choices were perfectly serviceable. As the jailer, some men had been entrusted to his custody.

Like many criminals, these had a back story. What he had heard was that these men had been trying to proselytize—to convert people—from their own choices of gods to the gods of Judaism. The story was that these particular men had driven out a demon from a slave girl in the course of talking about their God. What right did they have in bothering anyone else's choices for gods? They should have left well enough alone.

Jews had been causing trouble in Rome, so the emperor had ordered that all of them be expelled. The order seemed to give the city officials broad leeway over those who could be identified this way. Orders had been given that the men should have their outer clothing removed. "After they had beaten them severely, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to guard them securely" (Acts 16:23, EHV).

"Serves them right," the jailer must have thought. These subversive types were dangerous. They had to be taught a lesson. Perhaps this severe example would help to serve to warn others not to do such things. Subversive types could really be shown no mercy. "Because he received such a command, the jailer threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks" (Acts 16:24, EHV). He took his orders very seriously. Whether or not they would try to escape, these prisoners were to be considered dangerous. Their attitudes and convictions and attempts to turn others from perfectly serviceable gods could not be tolerated. They had to be taught a lesson.

Have you ever seen a set of stocks? Going through some old pictures recently I came across this one. Touring a castle in Belgium, we got to go into the torture chamber. I lay down on the stocks and my dad was ready to simulate some torture. It wouldn't take long with legs spread wide to develop some cramps. The pain would continue until the prisoners were released.

"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25, EHV). This was the first thing that really gave pause to the jailer. There his prisoners were, in most uncomfortable circumstances, and they were praying and singing to their God, as if things were still perfectly fine.

It was time to think about the comfortable choices of gods he had made. Were they *really*

perfectly serviceable? What would *he* be thinking if *his* gods had allowed him to be taken into custody, stripped nearly naked, beaten severely, and locked up in the deepest recesses of the prison with extra security measures in place to keep him confined?

Perhaps he would be angry if his gods allowed the same things to happen to *him* as to his prisoners. Perhaps he would be questioning whether his gods were still with him or noticed him or cared about him.

As he listened to their prayers and their songs, his faith in his own gods and their serviceability began to be shaken. Their prayers and their songs weren't desperate pleas. Instead, these prisoners were still acting in such a way as to *praise* their God for the great things he had done. *This* was something new to the Roman jailer. *This* was something different. Perhaps his own religious choices were a bit suspect. This might require some further study and some introspection.

“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. ²⁷When 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” (Acts 16:26-27, EHV). Not only were the jailer's *gods* demanding and unforgiving, so was his employer. Security of the prisoners was *his* responsibility. There would be no day in court. If all his prisoners were missing when daylight dawned, he would be summarily executed. Rather than wait for the inevitable, he drew his sword to take his own life.

II.

Is God far away? Is he paying attention? Do you feel forgotten? Has your faith been shaken?

Or have you, perhaps, “adjusted” your religious convictions a bit? Have the events of life shaken you enough that your focus has shifted from God to other gods of your own making? People living in the 21st century think they are too sophisticated to be suckered into following mythological gods.

Perhaps the *gods* have just become more sophisticated today. Science is godlike; all trust is placed in those who study it and proclaim it. There are so many benefits and blessings that have been brought into modern life by science, so many explanations for natural phenomena and even history. Government is godlike; all trust is placed in government to take care of you—from the cradle to the grave.

Modern people have come up with thousands of gods. They don't have names like Athena or Zeus. Instead, the gods of modern people are other people or things that take much of their focus or attention.

If science or government or other people or things have become your gods, 2020 has left you shaken. If the One true God is your God, but you let yourself be distracted by the events of a difficult year and took your focus away from the one thing needful, perhaps your faith has been shaken. Were *you* able to sing to God and offer prayers and praise about the great things he has done even while embroiled in turmoil the last few months?

III.

“But Paul shouted with a loud voice, ‘Don't harm yourself, because we are all here!’” (Acts 16:28, EHV). Paul and Silas singing hymns and praying had not just been to keep their spirits up. It wasn't even a prayer that God would intervene and release them. Their prayers and their praises were all about speaking about what God had done for them in sending Jesus to be the Savior from sin. Other prisoners had been listening in as the night wore on. Even those closer to the front door had not made a beeline for freedom; Paul and Silas must have encouraged them to stay. “We are all here.”

“The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling in front of Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’” (Acts 16:29-30, EHV). Realization struck. The jailer knew that the gods he had considered adequate and serviceable could *never* have done what these men's God had done—his gods could not send an earthquake that

would not only shake the doors off their hinges, but also release the chains that held people in their bonds.

Beyond that, no one who followed the gods *he* had followed up to this point would have stayed behind or given any consideration to others who might be affected. He knew that he would have preserved his *own* skin and never have given a second thought to those left behind.

These men were different. They were proclaiming the praises of a different kind of God. “What must I do to be saved?” The gods all wanted something from followers. He was ready to listen more to what Paul and Silas had to say.

Imagine his surprise. “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” (Acts 16:31-32, EHV).

There is nothing to do. Jesus has done it all. Believe.

Believe is another of those gospel imperatives we talked about recently. You have heard what God has said. In fact, the jailer’s words indicate that the Holy Spirit had already worked in him. There was already faith, however slim, however small. Now...nurture it. “Believe in the Lord Jesus.”

“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” (Acts 16:33-34, EHV).

Not so concerned was the jailer any more about consequences from his employers. He would follow the *true* God, and he wanted all the members of his household to do so, too. Despite the hour, he brought them to his own home. His whole family was baptized. For those who had once been his prisoners, food was prepared. Imagine the rejoicing his family experienced as they gave thanks for the message Paul and Silas brought to them.

IV.

So many people have had their foundations shaken this past year. Even you, perhaps, have had some tremors of uncertainty, but *you* know where true salvation lies. *You* know that more important than life or the things of this life is the forgiveness of sins won for you by Jesus.

Like Paul and Silas, when others are trembling with fear around you, you can direct others to what really matters. Don’t put your trust in governments or science or people or things. All these can fail you—all can let you down. Sooner or later *all* those things will disappoint you and leave you shaken.

“Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31, EHV). God will *never* let you down. He has promised never to leave you or forsake you. He has promised that in good times and bad he will work things out for your eternal good.

Though all around you things are in turmoil, the God of your salvation stands unshaken; his promises of forgiveness and eternal life never fail. God bless your praise of his eternal goodness and mercy toward all in Christ Jesus. Amen.