

Stories of Salvation

Acts 16:11-34

Preached September 6, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us. One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and

the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God. (Acts 16:11-34)

Introduction. Nestled atop Lookout Mountain in a rural area is Camp Lookout. For nearly 50 years, the camp has served children, youth and adults in this region. Do you know that members of this congregation were instrumental in its creation? Even today, many of you support scholarships that make it possible for our Inner City Ministry students and others who lack resources to attend summer camp. Children of various backgrounds from inner city to rural to suburban, poor, middle and upper class are blended together in a community of what the kingdom is intended to look like.

This summer, 656 campers were nurtured in the Christian faith at Camp Lookout. One hundred and one of those children and youth made first-time commitments to walk daily with God as disciples of Jesus Christ. For most of those campers, that will be a defining moment in their journey of salvation.

They stepped in the waters of salvation and now are on the journey of faith.

As rich as the nature of salvation is, so is the human experience of salvation. How people enter into a saving relationship with God and how that is lived out is diverse. There is no one pattern or experience. God works in our lives in unique ways to bring us to the places where we experience the fullness of salvation.

This morning I want to invite you to join me in exploring some stories that illustrate God's work of salvation in the lives of people both people in the Bible and folks of our time.

Lydia. Lydia was a prominent business woman in Philippi. She had been raised in Thyatira which was known for its purple dye industry. It was from that background that she became a broker for purple cloth, an expensive commodity worn by royalty and people of significant means. Lydia probably associated with the rich, the famous and the politically powerful. She owned her own business and her own home. Lydia was part of the upper-class of her day.

Lydia also was a religious woman. The Bible describes her as a God-worshiper or God-fearer. In all likelihood she was a non-Jewish woman who had been exposed to the Jewish faith and was drawn to it. While she was probably was not a proselyte, she did participate in weekly worship in Philippi, which was held on the riverside because there was no Jewish synagogue within the city.

One Sabbath, a couple of Jewish guests joined their riverside service. One of the men was invited to speak and Lydia chose to listen. As he spoke, he shared about the life, death and resurrection of one called Jesus. The speaker claimed that Jesus was the Messiah. As he spoke, God touched and opened Lydia's heart and she soaked in what he was saying. She accepted the invitation to be baptized and she and her family entered the waters of salvation. Lydia then opened her home to the

guests and there was born the first house church in Philippi.

Lydia was a person who had a rich religious background and faith in God. When she was exposed to the Good News, she listened and God touched her heart. She did not have a radical encounter with Christ or dramatic transformation. Her story in Acts is a continuing step in her journey of salvation.

I can relate to Lydia. I was born in a Christian home and my father was a bivocational pastor. I was raised in the church and church was an important part of our lives. As a child, I enjoyed going to church, Sunday School, Bible study and youth. I cannot remember a time when I did not believe in Jesus.

Throughout my early journey, I had ongoing experiences that grounded and strengthened my faith. One happened when I was eight years old. Dr. George Criswell, longtime pastor of Second UMC, Knoxville was preaching revival services at our church. On Sunday morning, he gave an invitation for all who would come follow Jesus. That day, I went forward and made a public commitment and was baptized. I still remember my father's voice break as he said, "Dwight, I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

In my late teens, I remember another place on that journey of salvation. Faced with the normal youth challenges and temptations, I came to a point of decision. A speaker at a District Youth gathering challenged us about giving our lives fully to God. That evening I prayed and surrendered my life as fully as I knew how to Jesus. There have been many such moments since that day as I have continued this journey of salvation.

The slave fortune teller. In the city of Philippi, there were a couple of businessmen who had profited significantly at the expense of a slave girl they owned. She is described in our text as having a "spirit of divination." She was a fortuneteller. Note that she was a slave and was at the bottom of the social ladder.

Along Hixson Pike north of the mall there is the house of a fortuneteller. A year or so ago, she had a camper for

sale parked on the lot. As I passed by I thought, "If she is good at telling the future, why does she need to advertise the camper. Why doesn't she just call up the person who will buy it?"

This slave girl's trade is part of one that has generally been looked on as being part of the dark or demonic side of religious matters. Whether one regards it as "trickery" or demonic, it is nearly always looked down upon in faith communities.

As Paul and his companions traveled through the town, this slave girl would follow them around and would proclaim, "These men are slaves of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation." To announce this a time or two would have been supportive but she kept doing this. Finally Paul became annoyed and confronted her. He ordered the spirit to come out of the woman. Immediately she was changed. She was liberated from those forces that had driven her life. She had tasted the waters of salvation.

Unfortunately, the Bible does not tell us what happened to her after this point. In all likelihood her "owners" probably discarded her. Did she become a part of this new church planted in Philippi? Did the members take her under their wings and nurture her in the faith? Did she continue the journey of salvation? Through the ages, many have been touched by Jesus in significant ways yet they have not had the on-going nurture in the faith. Many fall back into their former ways of life. As a church we have a huge responsibility to provide discipleship and the converts have the responsibility to stay connected.

Dan Kimball in his book, *They Like Jesus but not the Church*, tells a story of a 24 year old young woman who became a member of the church he pastors. This woman had been heavily into witchcraft and magic. She had joined a coven, a group of witches, and worked in a local witchcraft and magic store.

One Easter, Kimball's church had an outdoor art display related to the Stations of the Cross and had members distributing information about the church. This woman was interested. She followed up by checking out the church's website and began attending Sunday

evening services. She would leave the witchcraft store and go to church. Over a period of time she placed her faith in Christ and was baptized (185).

Isn't God's grace amazing? God reaches out to deliver those who have turned to the "dark side" and shares his love and deliverance with them.

The Jailer. In Philippi, there was a middle-class man who served as a police officer who oversaw the jail. One day a set of religious rabble rousers named Paul and Silas were turned over to him. This duo had caused a huge disturbance in the city and had been flogged by the court. The jailer took the pair deep into his prison and fastened their feet in stocks.

During the night, the jailer heard strange sounds coming from their cell. Typically, he heard groaning and cursing. But this night he heard singing – they were worshiping their God and it was not that of drunken men. How strange!

About midnight, an earthquake struck that shook the doors of prison open and jarred the stocks free. Imagining that the prisoners had escaped, the jailer drew his sword and was about to commit suicide. Was he afraid the prisoners might come and torture him? Was he afraid the government might execute him for his failure to keep the prisoners? Did he think the gods had sent the earthquake to judge him? We do not know. But we do know he was on the verge of suicide.

As he prepared to act, he heard Paul shout out, "Don't harm yourself, we are all here." The jailer brought them out and said, "What must I do to be saved?"

This question is great for evangelical preaching because of our great interest in "being saved." Yet I suspect that what he is asking is not what evangelical believers think when they hear the question. This jailer was not a theologian and probably had virtually no understanding of the Jesus movement. He probably was not concerned about a guarantee to get to heaven through Jesus. He may have been asking what he had to do for his life to be spared – either by Paul and the prisoners or by Paul's god. It was a question related to the urgency and crisis of the moment.

Paul's response though was theological in nature: Believe in or into the Lord Jesus and you will be saved along with your household. I guess the situation offered a prime time for evangelism. (Several years ago, I had a good friend who was a pilot. We discussed the airplane evangelism method. You know what it is? Take someone up in a plane, turn off the engine and see if they will confess Jesus.)

Paul's method was not as unscrupulous as what my friend and I debated. Paul shared with him not only to believe but discussed with him the word of the Lord. He shared what this faith was all about, who Jesus is and what it means to believe. When the man heard and understood, he and his family were baptized. The next scene demonstrates the depth of his transformation. He took them to his home, washed and treated their wounds and fed them. This man's conversion was dynamic and transformative.

Don was raised in a dysfunctional home of a father who was an alcoholic. As a late teen, Don joined the army and served in the Special Forces in Vietnam. When he returned home, he extended his education, married and had two children and worked his way up to a mid-level supervisory job in a plastics manufacturing plant. He and his family were living the typical middle-class American lifestyle.

Church and following Christ were not part of his vocabulary but his wife and mother-in-law were faithful church members in a Methodist church. As a result of some war injuries, Don developed severe back problems. His wife's pastor went to his home to talk with and to pray for Don. The pastor prayed that God would heal him.

The next Sunday morning, Don came to church and stood in the back of the sanctuary because of his back pain. He felt God had touched his life. From that point he continued to come. He came to his pastor requesting to be baptized. Don continued to grow in his faith and became a teacher and leader in that congregation. Don waded into and immersed himself in the waters of salvation.

Response to the Word.

This morning we have looked at several stories of God's saving work in people's life – how God touched those from the lowest place in society to the highest place – from the very religious to the pagan and dark side and all in the middle.

How has God touched your life with salvation? I encourage you to recall that story and to share your journey with one person this week. If you have a chance, write it down and send it to me.

Perhaps you have not waded into the waters of salvation, you have not trusted fully in Jesus the Lord. Today is a day of salvation, a time to begin that journey. As you come forward for communion, I encourage you to pray a prayer inviting Jesus to come into your life and to take charge. If you pray that prayer, please share it with someone before the day is over.