

Why The Prisoners Did Not Flee

Introduction. In Acts 16:24-28 we have a very familiar story — the conversion of the Philippian jailer. However, there is another important part of the story which is very often read and glossed over as if it is mere window dressing. It is the notice made of the prisoners who did not flee. Why, when the earthquake broke their bonds, did the prisoners not flee when they had the chance? After all, the doors were opened and “every one’s bands were loosed” (v. 26). However, when the prison guard jumped in, sword in hand, he expected to have to kill himself because the prisoners would surely be long gone. Yet, Paul’s famous words greeted him: “Do thyself no harm: for we are all here” (v. 28). Why didn’t the prisoners flee?

I. Physical And Spiritual Enslavement

A. Physical slavery.

1. When the body is shackled against the will of the one shackled (Genesis 37:28; Exodus 21:7; Deuteronomy 5:15; 23:15).
2. The victim will fight being chained with all of his power, and given the opportunity he will flee.
3. One so enslaved and forced into a life of abuse and servitude would cut off a foot if it meant escaping the shackles.

B. Indentured servitude.

1. The Bible mentions this kind of slavery the most often (Leviticus 25:39). Jacob agreed to a form of indentured slavery in order to marry Rachel. Due to trickery, he served Laban for 14 years (Genesis 29:18, 30).
2. However indentured servitude may have benefitted the slave, it was probably viewed as unpleasant, because humans crave freedom and liberty. Onesimus may have been this kind of slave (Philemon 11-12, 15).

C. Slavery of the heart and mind (involuntary).

1. While physical chains are abhorrent and people would do anything to escape, slavery of the mind is different.
 - a) Slaves of this kind often do not know they are enslaved. Their captors work hard to convince them that their condition is their own choice.
 - b) Kidnapped young women and men live for years with their captors, and are eventually given freedom to move about and they do not flee.
 - (1) Captors convince them no one loves them, or that the victim is part of a family now (cults do this).
 - (2) Captors convince victims that they cannot survive without the captor — total dependency (cults do this too).
2. False teaching does much to enslave the hearts and minds of men and women (Matthew 23:15; 2 Timothy 3:6-7; Titus 1:11; 2 Peter 2:14, 19).
 - a) This is slavery that is embraced and sometimes even sought out.
 - b) It comes to exist due to acceptance of a human philosophy.
 - c) The word of God seeks to produce the slavery of a disciple’s heart to the teachings of his master (Matthew 6:24; John 8:34; Romans 6:16).

II. The Case Of The Philippian Prisoners

- A. They were most likely jailed for known offenses (justly or unjustly).
 - 1. It might be that they were political prisoners. These are men and women who were jailed on pretended charges against the Roman government. Or, they were jailed for real crimes against Rome (Mark 15:7; Acts 17:7).
 - 2. Paul asked the guard about to flog him, “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned” (Acts 22:25). This implies that Roman citizens were subject to laws and could be condemned and punished as criminals against the state.
- B. Paul and Silas were jailed for doing the will of God.
 - 1. Paul and Silas’ only crime was that they preached the word of God.
 - 2. Yet, they were brought before the local magistrates on trumped-up charges (Acts 16:19-23).
 - a) Evil men whose livelihood was threatened by Paul’s preaching arrested Paul and Silas and dragged them to the authorities (v. 19).
 - b) They accused them of being troublesome Jews (v. 20).
 - c) They falsely accused them of teaching customs which are not lawful for Romans to receive and observe (v. 21).
- C. Roman prisons were horrendous.
 - 1. By comparison, modern prisons, no matter how bad they might be, are vacation spots compared to Roman prisons.
 - 2. They were little more than dungeons.
 - a) There was no thought of rehabilitating condemned criminals to turn them into productive citizens.
 - b) A Roman prison was a place to keep victims until it was decided when to kill them. Conditions were little more than those afforded animals.
 - 3. Roman prison included three other kinds of imprisonment:
 - a) Enslavement for gladiatorial sport. Prisoners were kept chained to walls in cells called “kennels.”
 - b) Servitude in mines.
 - c) Servitude on galley ships. They were chained to oars, and expected to live, sleep, eat, perform bodily functions, and row in a sitting position.
 - 4. In an article titled “Prisons In Paul’s World,” author Bob Fraser described the fourth kind of prison: “The final type of prison was that in which Paul was kept. Often, prisons of this kind were dug out of solid rock and were underground. Prisoners, their guards, and their provisions were lowered through an opening the size of a manhole. This manhole was the only means of entrance and exit. In the Roman colony of Alba, the prison was under the marketplace. Rain and debris from the market and from animals easily dropped into this ‘house of darkness.’ Neither animal waste nor that of the prisoners found its way out easily.”
 - a) Prisoners were usually restrained and lengths of chain depended on flight risk and discipline problems of the prisoners.
 - b) Troublesome prisoners were often chained by the ankles with legs spread apart, and forced to sit in the same position and in squalor indefinitely.

- D. So, here is the question that we are compelled to ask, “Why didn’t the prisoners flee when they had the chance to escape such a horrible place?”
1. The answer is found in Acts 16:25: “And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them.”
 2. One might be tempted to argue that the prisoners stayed put because God caused it to happen miraculously. But there is no evidence for this.
 3. The prisoners were listening to Paul and Silas sing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).
 4. The prisoners were hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ, perhaps for the very first time in their lives.
 5. Whenever the gospel was preached in Acts, it had a profound effect on the hearers. Sometimes large numbers of people obeyed it.
- E. Here is what the prisoners were hearing and learning:
1. They were hearing that God so loved the world that He sent Jesus to die for their sins (John 3:16).
 2. They were hearing that there was power in the blood of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:9).
 3. They were hearing that through Jesus they could have access by one Spirit to the Father, and that they could be fellow citizens and members of the household of God (Ephesians 2:18-19).
 4. They were hearing that if they were united in the likeness of Jesus’ death, they would be raised in the likeness of His resurrection (Romans 6:5).
 5. They were hearing that they themselves were responsible for crucifying the old man of sin, so that they should no longer be slaves of it (Romans 6:6).
 6. And that by dying to sin, they would be freed from sin and live with Christ (Romans 6:7-8).

Conclusion. Why did the Philippian prisoners not flee when they had the chance? They heard about a new kind of enslavement. It was an enslavement of the heart and mind, and it was enslavement to Jesus Christ; and while their current predicament would likely end in death, their voluntary enslavement to Jesus Christ and His gospel would result in their salvation, and the glorious hope of a beautiful inheritance (1 Peter 1:3-4).

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