

Sermon for Sunday, March 17, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"WHEN LIFE HAS NO HOPE---CAN YOU COPE?"

Acts 16:19-34

Text: "And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, 'Men, what must I do to be saved?'" Acts 16:29, 30

Transport yourself this morning if you will to the little country of Macedonia, situated just above the land of the Greeks, to the city of Philippi, which rests on the coast of the Aegean Sea. This is an ancient and illustrious city and it bears the name of Phillip of Macedon. It was Phillip who had united the ancient Greek city-states into a great nation. It was Phillip who had broken the back of foreign rule and oppression. It was Phillip who had extended the rule of the Macedonians beyond anything they had dreamed of. And it was Phillip who had raised a son whom he named Alexander. That young son was to grow up and become emblazoned upon the pages of history as Alexander the Great. By the age of thirty he had conquered the known world and we are told that he wept because there were no more worlds to conquer. Yes, Philippi was an ancient city, a city with a great and glorious past, a city that proudly bore the name of one of the greatest figures in the history of the land.

The jailor of Philippi was proud of his city and he was proud of her history. It was a source of pride and satisfaction to him to be one of the officials of his city. It was no small or mean thing to be jailor in such a city as this and he did not take his office lightly. Thus it was, when the city magistrates brought two prisoners to him and charged him to keep them safely, he took every precaution provided by the facilities of his ancient prison. He placed his two prisoners in the inmost cell of the jail. Not satisfied with that, he locked their arms and legs in the great chain shackles that hung from the walls and he posted guards at the cell doors. He must have felt confident that these two would never escape from his prison.

Now, it is highly unlikely that the jailor did not know who these two prisoners were. The Bible tells us that Paul and Silas had been in the city a number of days. They had been telling anyone who would listen about Jesus Christ and already a number of important people had believed in him. News of what these men were saying had gotten around town quickly. It is probable that the jailor himself may have stood on the edge of some crowd that gathered to hear St. Paul and he had heard Paul tell of the man Jesus, of whom he was and what he had come to do. It may be that he had gone slowly home to mull over in his mind the wonder of what he heard. But then an unfortunate thing had happened. A slave girl who had a spirit of divination had been cured by these two men. Her owners had made a great deal of money from her fortune telling ability, but that strange spirit that had possessed her was gone now. They were understandably angry at their loss of revenue and they had Paul and Silas arrested for disturbing the peace and the city magistrates had committed the two men to jail and into the keeping of the jailor. It was then that he had put them in the inner cell block of his jail and had put their feet in the heavy chains hanging from the prison walls.

The reaction of his prisoners must have amazed and puzzled the jailor. Ancient prisons were not nice places to be and the primitive conditions must have been most unpleasant. Besides that, Paul and Silas had been severely beaten, the Bible tells us, before they were locked up. Yet, in spite of this the jailor must have been astonished by his two prisoners. The Bible tells us that Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. And the Bible tells us that all the

other prisoners were listening to them. I want to impress upon you how very unusual this must have been. If you can imagine yourself in their place--attacked by a crowd, beaten in public, cast into the inner cell of a cruel, filthy prison, locked in the stocks--would you have felt like singing and praising God? Would you have felt like sharing with the other prisoners how good God is? Well, you know very well you would not. So I want you to realize how very unusual this scene was for the Bible tells us that about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

It was at this point that a tremor ran through the earth and the buildings began to shake and a growing rumble filled the air. All across the city people must have been shocked awake and in a moment of terror they must have fled from their homes as articles fell from shelves, as walls cracked and here and there homes collapsed with a roar. It was an earthquake. The prison was hard hit. Although it had been sturdily built, its foundations cracked under the strain and the doors were sprung open. The chain shackles fell from the walls as the mortar cracked and broke. Gradually the trembling of the ground subsided and the roaring of falling things grew quiet. It had lasted only a few moments but it had seemed much longer. The jailor had come wide awake at the first tremor and now he dashed to the prison to see how much damage there was. His heart sank as he saw the doors standing open and the dazed guards just returning to their posts after fleeing in terror from flying masonry in the swaying jail. The jailor knew his prisoners were gone and he would be held responsible. In a moment of time everything was gone--his job, his honor--all were gone. In despair he drew his sword to take his own life. It was more than he could bear. It was at that point that a voice cried out from the depths of the prison rubble--"Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

Let me impress upon us how incredible this moment was. Here is a prisoner who has been badly treated; beaten, humiliated, cast into prison. Yet, rather than escape or take advantage of his situation, he acts swiftly to prevent his oppressor from harming himself. What happens next is high drama indeed. The jailor calls for lights and rushes into the shattered prison. There are all of his prisoners. When the light falls upon the faces of Paul and Silas he sinks to his knees before them, "Men," he says, "what must I do to be saved."

Let us pause for a moment to focus on this jailor. What has brought him to this dramatic moment? I would have you notice first of all that he lost control of his situation. He became the victim of circumstances over which he had no control. He was powerless in the face of events too great for him to handle. If the prisoners had made a break or attempted to escape he could have handled the situation--he could have bound them more securely and posted more guards. But suddenly--in the middle of the night when he least expected it--a situation arose over which he had no control.

Notice in the second place that when he lost control, he also lost confidence in himself. When he saw the disaster that confronted him, when he realized that he had no control over what life had dealt him, suddenly life had no hope and he simply could not cope with it. He simply had no inner resources to deal with his disaster. Self-confidence, self-reliance, personal resourcefulness were absolutely gone. There was nothing nor anybody to whom he could turn and he could not help himself. And when life was without hope and when he could not cope with what had happened to him, he drew his sword to take his life.

The jailor and his situation is reflective of life for all of us. Most of us can do fairly well, we can handle most of the things that life brings our way. But the day comes for all of us when we lose control of the situation. Things are taken out of our hands and there is nothing we can do. There comes a day when

the surgeon says, "I'm sorry, but it was malignant and there is nothing we can do." The teacher says, "I'm sorry, but our tests show there is severe brain damage and there is nothing we can do for your child." The policeman says, "I'm sorry, but the brakes failed and he couldn't make the curve." The doctor says, "I'm sorry, but we did all we could." A business fails, a job is lost, a marriage breaks up, a child goes wrong--and suddenly we lose control of the situation. Things are out of our hands. And when life has no hope--can you cope? Can we handle life when our dreams are destroyed, our hopes smashed, our fondest aspirations taken away? Yes, when life tumbles in--what then?

It was at a moment such as this that the jailor cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" Is not that the hungry cry of the human heart? In the midst of the worst that life can do comes the cry, "Is there any hope? Does life have any meaning? Is there integrity in life that makes it worth the living or shall I take my sword and fall upon it."

When the jailor reached the point where life was out of control and when he had lost confidence in his own power to manage his life, he asked St. Paul if there was an answer. St. Paul replied that there was. He said to the jailor that there was only one solution to life and that solution was Jesus. Because the jailor was at the end of his rope--because he realized that life did not work very well without something or someone--he reached out to Jesus. The Bible tells us that he was baptized at once, with his family. The Bible tells us that "he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God."

Life will always have its situations which are out of our control. That is part of the risk we run in being human. Those situations can destroy us, they can take the joy out of life, they can leave us embittered and resentful, they can leave us hopeless. When the Philippian jailor reached that point, he discovered Jesus Christ. Life took on a new dimension. He discovered purpose and meaning that enabled him to rise above disaster and he rejoiced because he had believed in God.

I do not know your need this morning, but I do know that all of us have needs of one sort or another. Life keeps bringing to us situations beyond our control. Many of us are not handling life very well and we are filled with anguish, with deep needs. There is still someone for us--he is Jesus. When we put our trust in him, our hand in his, we can cope with life. Have you truly put your trust in him? Have you invited him into your life? Have you surrendered your will to him? You see, when life seems to have no hope--no purpose or rhyme or reason--we can cope with the worst that life brings if we have Jesus.