

Sermon for Sunday, August 28, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"HOW TO MAKE A SUCCESSFUL JAILBREAK"

Acts 16:25-34

Text: "...and he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God."
Acts 16:34

Back in May when Sydney and I were in Greece, we took a plane from Athens and flew north over the Aegean Sea to land at the city of Kavala. Kavala is actually the ancient Bible city of Neapolis which originally served as the sea-port outlet for the largest city of Macedonia, Philippi. Philippi you will remember was named after Philip of Macedonia who was the father of Alexander the Great. During the days of St. Paul, Philippi was not only the largest city in the area, it was also a Roman Colony. Today Philippi is a mass of ruins. The area is subject to earthquakes and the place has been abandoned for centuries since it was last destroyed. If you remember your Bible, you will recall that when St. Paul first arrived in Philippi, he went down to the river which still flows by the ruins to a place of prayer. There as he told about Jesus a woman heard and the Bible says, "The Lord opened her heart..." Thus, Lydia became the first convert on mainland Europe, an event that was to change the history of western civilization.

Near the ruins of the ancient theatre of Philippi is a place that is believed to be the remains of the jail that we read about in our Scripture this morning. As we stood there that day, we could not help but remember the story that we read about Paul and the Philippian jailer. What I would like to do this morning is talk about these two men and their relationship to that jail.

First, let's look at St. Paul. The Bible tells us that Paul healed a young girl who had some sort of psychic problem, but from which her owners were making money. As the Bible puts it, "(she) had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying." When Paul healed her, the girl's owners brought charges against Paul and his traveling companion, Silas, and stirred up a riot. As a consequence they were beaten and not only were they put in jail, but the Bible says they were put, "into the inner prison" and their feet were fastened in the stocks.

Yet, in spite of the shameful way they had been humiliated by the crowd, in spite of the beating they had received at the hands of the magistrates, in spite of the fact that they were placed in the inner prison and fastened in the painful stocks, we come to this amazing passage, "But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God..."

But second, let us look at the relationship of the jailer to his prison. Obviously he felt a sense of importance when the prisoners were put in his charge and he took his responsibility seriously by placing them under the tightest security possible. Yet, when the earthquake struck at midnight, when the doors were sprung open and the very fetters were shaken from their stone fastenings; when it seemed obvious that all of the prisoners were gone, then the jailer moved to take his own life.

Now, the question that I would like to ask you is this: who was the real prisoner? If Paul felt like a prisoner, surely he could have escaped. Instead, he cried out to stop the jailer from taking his life and said, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." And would a man oppressed by his captivity have been praying and singing at midnight? On the other hand, how about the jailer? If his prisoners escaped, his reputation would be gone. For him everything was at stake - his reputation, his job, his standing in the community. And with that gone the Bible tells us he drew his sword and was about to kill himself.

Was not the jailer in a far truer sense, a prisoner? Paul was only in jail, but he was not a prisoner. His spirit--his heart--were free and, as he himself once put it, he could give thanks in every circumstance. But not the jailer. His life was bound up in his job, his jail, his community image. Yes, the jailer was the real prisoner of his own jail. He could not give thanks when the jail seemed destroyed--he could only fall on his sword.

Are you a prisoner this morning? Most of us are in one kind of jail or another. Is there some prison in your life that holds you captive? Are you the prisoner of some bad habit that is destroying your life? Some are. It may be alcohol, it may be drugs, it may be smoking too much, eating too much. And we are prisoners. Some of us are prisoners of bad emotions. We are the captives of violent anger, of a dirty mouth, a gossiping tongue. Some of us are victims of bad habit patterns that make us prisoners. We may have sloppy habits, poor discipline, lazy dispositions. Some of us are victims of bad attitudes. We suffer from prejudice, from a judgmental heart, from self-righteous condemnation of others, from a nagging spirit. Some of us are in jail to dirty minds, suffering from lusts and passions and evil thoughts.

Have I touched on any of your prisons yet? Some of us are prisoner to things. Just the other night I asked a young man, "What do you want to do with your degree when you graduate from college?" And he replied, "I want to make money." Is he a prisoner? How important are salary or house or car or club to you? Back in 1923 an important meeting was held at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago and among those attending were nine of the world's most successful financiers. They built their lives, their reputations, on making money and did very well at it. Twenty-five years later, after the crash of the stock market, what had happened to those men? The president of the largest independent steel company, Charles Schwab, died in bankruptcy and lived on borrowed money for five years before his death. The president of the greatest utility company, Samuel Insull, died a fugitive from justice and penniless in a foreign land. The president of the largest gas company, Howard Hopson, went insane. The great wheat speculator, Arthur Cotton, died abroad insolvent. The president of the New York Stock Exchange, Richard Whitney, went to Sing Sing Penitentiary. The member of the President's cabinet, Albert Fall, was pardoned from prison so that he could die at home. The greatest "bear" on Wall Street, Jesse Livermore, died a suicide. The head of the greatest monopoly, Ivar Krueger, died a suicide. The president of the bank of International Settlements, Leon Fraser, died a suicide. Were those men prisoners, held fast in some jail of the soul? Were they not captive to some dreadful jailer?

Yes, there are many kinds of prisons. H.G. Wells, the famous historian and philosopher said at the age of 61, "I have no peace. All life is at the end of its tether." Was he in some inner prison? The poet Byron said, "My days are in the yellow leaf, the flowers and the fruits of life are gone, the worm and the canker, and the grief are mine along." Was he free? Ralph Barton, one of the top cartoonists of the nation, left this note pinned to his pillow before he took his life, "I have had few difficulties, many friends, great success; I have gone from wife to wife, and from house to house, visited great countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up 24 hours of the day." Was he a free man.

Yes, I suspect most of us are prisoners of one sort or another this morning. I suspect most of us have some private jail in our souls where we are held captive in the inner stocks. Is there any way to escape? Is there any way to break out of jail successfully?

The first step in a successful jailbreak is to admit you are a prisoner. That's what happened to the Philippian jailer. The Bible says that he cried out for freedom and said, "What must I do to be saved?" Does that seem over-simplified? Actually, it isn't. Many of us do not want to be free-- or don't want to pay the price of freedom. You must want to be free. You must want to escape. You must desire with all your heart, to yearn with your whole being to be a captive. no more. As we have thought about the different kinds of jails we are in, and as perhaps we have touched on one that was close to you, or perhaps as you have consciously admitted to yourself some particular prison in your life, let me ask you this: Do you want to be free--truly free? Do you truly long with all your heart for that prison door to swing open in your life? You see, until you do, you can never be free.

Here is the second step in a successful jailbreak: Put Jesus at the center of your life. Isn't that what Paul told the jailer to do? And to put Jesus at the center of your life involves three things. First, it involves your mind; second, it involves your heart; but third it involves your will. Let me illustrate. Suppose a young man has heard about a certain lady and what he has heard makes him want to meet her. The meeting itself is even more exciting than he had dreamed. Intellectually his mind liked what it saw. He liked her looks, her personality, her intellectual charm. But for this young man, looking for a wife, was that enough? No, but as he dated her and got to know her better something happened! He fell in love. Now both his heart and mind were involved, but they still were not married. But finally they stand before the minister and there they commit their wills to one another, mutual giving of self. Now they are indeed married for marriage involves the mind, the heart, but also the will.

Some of you may say, "I believe in Jesus as God's son. I believe he died for my sins. Intellectually I am committed to a belief in God. Why am I still a prisoner? Because your will is not committed to Jesus

Someone else may say, "I heard a great sermon once at a youth retreat or at a special service, and I believed in Jesus and gave my heart to Him. Why am I still a prisoner?" And the answer is, you will always be a prisoner until your will is surrendered.

Another may say, "I have been a church member a long time. I come regularly to services. I pray often and read my Bible. I give generously to the church and live a good life. Why am I still a prisoner to so many things in my life?" And the answer is because you have never surrendered your will to Jesus.

A successful jail break first of all required an earnest, burning desire to be free. But second it requires that you put Jesus at the center of your life--that you give Him your mind and believe in Him; that you give Him your heart and love Him; but most of all that you give Him your will and turn the control of your life over to Him.

When you do that you will no longer be a prisoner. You can sing and pray at the darkest midnight or, like the Philippian jailer, you can rejoice that you have believed.