

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose.²⁷ The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped.²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

²⁹The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family. (Acts 16:25-34)

Jesus is Still the Answer

What do you think is the greatest thing about being a Lutheran? Lutheran elementary schools? Very orderly worship? Potlucks? Our ability and willingness to laugh at ourselves? Those things are all great. But the greatest thing about being a Lutheran is the gospel. Every time we come to church, we know that we're going to hear that Jesus died to take our sins away. We're going to hear that we are forgiven. That's important because often we struggle with our sins and our stupidity, with our failure to be the spouse or parent or worker that we're supposed to be. Sometimes that sin and failure weighs us down and scares or depresses us. The answer is Jesus. His life, his death, his resurrection applied to me lift me back up again. But sometimes, we face other kinds of crises – crises that don't necessarily trace back to a specific sin that I'm guilty of. Sometimes we wrestle with despair. Sometimes, we shake our heads over the disaster that our families have become. So we may be looking for a different kind of answer. Or at least, we may be asking a different question than how to deal with my sense of guilt. You know what? **Jesus is still the answer.** That's the beauty and the glory of the gospel! There is no problem in this life that is immune to the comfort Christ brings.

I.

Jesus is still the answer to every crisis. In the word of God that we have before us this morning, we see a man in crisis. We don't know his name. We don't know how old he was or how many children he had. The only thing we know about him is his occupation. He was a jailer. He was the warden of the prison in the city of Philippi. How he got this job, how long he had had it, whether he liked it or not, we really can't say. All we can say is what happened when he found himself guarding two prisoners named Paul and Silas.

Paul and Silas had come to Philippi to preach the gospel. This was one of the first European cities to hear that message. The Christians there were some of the earliest people like us to have faith in Christ. But not everybody was happy that Paul and Silas had come. Not long after they arrived, they cast a demon out of a slave girl. This act of mercy got them into trouble because the owners of this possessed girl made money from her. The demon would speak through her and tell fortunes. Being a real demon, these fortunes were quite accurate. When the owners realized that Paul and Silas had ruined this business, they whipped up a crowd of anti-Jewish sentiment, got them arrested, flogged and thrown in prison. That's where we find them in our text for this morning. In prison, sore and bloody, with their feet in stocks, and singing hymns to encourage each other and to share the gospel with the guard and the other prisoners.

In the middle of the night, God caused an earthquake to shake the jail. All the locked doors opened. I suppose some of that would be normal in an earthquake. But this was a prison. Presumably it was built very solidly to keep men locked inside. But all the doors opened. And everybody's chains fell off. Again, I suppose that one or two might not have been properly locked. But why would shaking open all the chains? God did miracles.

I'm sure that Paul and Silas and the other prisoners were very happy about that. But for the jailer, this was a crisis. He woke up and saw that the doors were open. Of course, he assumed the prisoners were already gone. So he drew his sword to kill himself. Why? Well, Roman law was very harsh. Allowing one prisoner to

escape could result in the jailer being executed. Certainly, allowing them all to escape would be worse. Whether he afraid of being crucified or he just wanted to avoid the shame of a trial and the anxiety of waiting is hard to say. Perhaps he just felt like a failure. Whatever was going on in his mind, he was about to take the easy way out and kill himself.

Paul knew that. He understood the way that the human mind works. Sometimes when we're suffering a crisis – when we're sick or afraid or depressed – we just wish that our life would be over. Some people are more prone to thinking this way. But most people at least think about it at some point in their lives. Paul knew that this jailer would think about it. Perhaps God revealed to him that he was about to go through with it. In any event, Paul called out from inside the jail, **“Don't harm yourself! We are all here!”**

Look at the miracles God used to reach this man: God sent an earthquake. God opened the prison doors. God caused the chains to fall off their wrists. And God kept all those prisoners in their cells! Now, those miracles did help Paul and Silas, too, but God did all these things at this exact moment because he wanted this jailer in his kingdom. And it all had the desired effect: the jailer rushed in and fell at Paul and Silas' feet and asked, **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”**

What do you think was the greatest miracle in this story? The earthquake? The chains falling off? The prisoners staying put? Those are all impressive. But the greatest miracle was the change in this jailer's heart. He went from despair to trembling and confusion to faith. That miracle took place through the gospel. Paul said, **“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”** Luke tells us that he and Silas **“spoke the word of the Lord to him.”** Now what does that mean? It means the gospel. Only after he heard the gospel did he trust in Jesus. In a moment of crisis, Paul and Silas used the message about Jesus to move this man from despair to faith.

Why focus on the gospel at that moment? Because the gospel is a radical message of hope in God even in the face of the worst that this life has to offer. The gospel says that we have triumphed over all the pain and sorrow that this world can send us. Everything that's wrong with our life is the result of sin. But the gospel teaches us that Jesus conquered sin when he rose from the dead. Jesus freed us from the power of sin, even in this life. All that sin does to us, it does only because God allows it to happen. Even the most painful things we face are part of God's plan to keep our faith alive until we stand with him. At that moment, we will totally and completely free from pain and sorrow forever.

That makes Jesus the answer to all our crises. His victory over sin is also a victory over all the pains and sorrows of this life. And the gospel message is a miracle that God gives us to comfort us in those sorrows. We may not have an earthquake shake the building we're standing in when trouble comes. We may not see doors open miraculously. Whatever chains are holding us prisoner – whatever difficulties or pain clamps onto our lives – we may not see these things disappear in a moment. But we have the greatest miracle we could ask for. The gospel has the power to overcome every crisis we find ourselves in because it has the power to renew our faith in Christ. It's natural for us to despair. It's natural for us to want to give up and die. But the Holy Spirit is greater than our hearts and he works in the gospel. Jesus died for us. And if Jesus died for us, God is going to take care of us! Jesus rose for us. God is going to run our lives so that when all is said and done, we will live with him forever.

God wants us to have joy. But sometimes, the path to joy leads through suffering and sorrow. Sometimes, we need to be like the jailer in crisis. We need to be on our knees asking our pastor or another Christian what we need to be saved. God drives us to those moments of crisis because he wants to give us that greatest power of all: his love and forgiveness. His absolute promise that we will spend eternity with him. When that day comes, we will see that all that happened to us here worked for our good. And we will rejoice forever.

II.

And we don't rejoice alone. In this account, we see the gospel reaching the people we care most about. **Jesus is still the answer for every family.** Now, our families might not look like this man's family. Luke speaks of a household. Probably there was a husband and wife and children. They may have been older family members living with them as well. Almost certainly, there were slaves, both men and women, adults and children.

Our families today often look different than this man's did. Today, we have blended families – families with children from different marriages, children who share some parents but not others. Today, we have

families in which grown children live hundreds or even thousands of miles away from their parents. And we still have more traditional families, where husbands and wives raise their own children, sometimes they even live near to their parents. Of course, we have no slaves.

Whatever your family looks like, having peace and harmony in that family is probably very important to you. Where do you spend more time than with your family? Who are you more emotionally invested in than your spouse and your parents and your children? If our families are in trouble, we're unhappy. In today's society, families are very much under stress – you could even say that God's concept of marriage and family are under siege in the U.S.

Jesus is the answer to peace and harmony and spiritual growth in our families. Now, I'm not saying that Christian families never have problems. But this first century family shows us the difference that the gospel makes to a family. God again did the miracle of faith through his word. Luke says, **“Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.”**

The gospel lies at the heart of a healthy family, because knowing that God loves you is fundamental to living in peace. Knowing that you are a sinner who was bought and paid for by the blood Christ is the key tool for dealing with each other in love. That's true in all our relationships. If anything, the more we care about someone, the more time we spend with them and the more we worry about what they think, the more we need the gospel to strengthen that relationship. To teach us to forgive and to love.

This family shows us the gift of the gospel: joy. Joy is a gift of God. When life is good, joy is a wonderful feeling. It's happiness. But joy is stronger than mere happiness. In our funeral service, we say that we've come “to seek God's comfort in our sorrow and to rejoice in the promise of the resurrection.” Joy is knowing that better things are coming because God loves you and Christ died and rose for you. Joy is ours through the gospel, even when our families are struggling. When you have the gift of joy, you have a weapon to fight against the evils of this life.

Joy begins with Jesus. A family filled with joy and faith is a family that has the tools it needs to work on difficult situations. Now, hard things may continue. People we love may fall victim to substance abuse or other terrible problems. They may hurt or disappoint us. People we love may become ill or die. Stress may cause fighting and pettiness. We Christians are still sinners. But Christ gives us forgiveness for all those sins. When I know that I'm forgiven, then I have the ability to forgive others – even those whom I love and who hurt me most. When I have joy in Christ by faith, I have strength to fight against the difficulties of life for the good of those I love and to pray without ceasing for God to rescue my family. When I trust in Jesus, I can trust that all things, even painful things, are things God permits for my good and for the good of those I love.

Jesus is the answer to everything. When he returns, we will see that clearly. Until he returns, God gives us the gospel to get us through the hardships of life. That may seem like it's nothing. But don't be fooled, my friends. The gospel is the power of God. It's more than just words. It's promises that can never fail. It's comfort and strength and joy in a world that has too much darkness. Jesus lived and he died and he rose for you. Jesus has conquered all the hardships that you have to face. Jesus will care for you for as long as you live here. Then he will bring you home to live with him forever. That gospel gives us the strength to deal with all that we face here. Bring your family to that gospel often. Come and hear it yourself and rejoice in this great gift of God. Amen.