

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!"

²⁹ The 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?"

³¹ They 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)

Your Baptism is all About Christ!

Do you have any baptism stories? Several years ago, I baptized a first grader here in church. We put a step stool next to the font for him to stand on. I thought I had explained clearly to him that he should just bend over the water and I would pour it on his head. But instead, he plunged his head into the water. Another time, I had a baby who was probably almost a year old. She threw a fit. She was kicking and fighting and I tried really, really hard to get at least some water on her, and I think I did. But it was kind of hard to tell. Do you have any stories like that from when your children were baptized? Most people don't. I remember when my children were baptized but I don't have any funny or even touching stories to tell. The big story is what God did in those baptisms. That is really the point of our scripture lesson for this morning. It's one of the most famous baptism stories ever told – the baptism of the jailor of Philippi and his family. But it's not really about the jailor or his family. Luke doesn't even tell us their names or even how many people were baptized. He doesn't describe how it was done. This story focuses on the gift God gives through baptism. That teaches us something very important about our own baptisms: **your baptism is all about Christ!**

I.

Now that doesn't mean your baptism isn't about you at all. It is *your* baptism and God came to you, and you alone, when the pastor poured the water on your head and said the words. But it wasn't just a ritual that marked a key moment in your life. It wasn't just a way of celebrating the fact that your parents' family was growing. It wasn't a choice or a commitment you made. The one who really did something in your baptism was God. **Your baptism is all about Christ rescuing you.**

We see that in the jailor of Philippi. In the verses before this, Paul and Silas came to preach to the city of Philippi. But they got arrested and without a trial, they were scourged and thrown into prison. Our lesson begins with them chained in the jail at Philippi, praying out loud and singing hymns to God. No doubt, they were trying to encourage each other in a tough circumstance. Scourging ripped the skin off your back and tore away the flesh. And they hadn't done anything wrong, but they were in jail. But rather than mopping and whining about how unfair all this was, they turned to Jesus. They prayed for strength. They sang hymns. And they did it together so that they could apply God's promises in Christ to each other. You could almost pass it by, but that was the first miracle of this reading.

Then came the second: about midnight there was an earthquake. But Luke says nothing about damage in the city. The only result of this earthquake was that the doors of the prison opened and the chains fell off the prisoners. Now, an earthquake might knock doors off their hinges, even the kind of heavy doors you'd put in a prison. But shaking the chains off of prisoners? That's not what I would expect an earthquake to do. But God set the prisoners free – and not just Paul and Silas. He freed all the prisoners in the jail at that moment.

The jailor woke up and realized what had happened. He assumed that all his prisoners were already gone. And the consequences for him personally would be severe. In the Roman world, citizens had a responsibility to run their cities and towns. This man would've been at least moderately wealthy, a fairly prominent local citizen. Failure in these public responsibilities was a disaster. It could mean that he himself

would be punished, with exile or even execution. It would almost certainly mean public humiliation and loss of position. And in the Roman world, the one manly act that would redeem you from public humiliation was suicide. That's what the jailor prepared to do. And Paul knew that was how he would react and he called out to him and said: **"Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"**

That was the third miracle. The prisoners did not run away. They were all listening to Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns. Maybe the Holy Spirit worked faith in their hearts. Maybe Paul convinced them stay. But we don't know. And that's when the fourth great miracle happened: God touched the jailor's heart. He ran in, called for lights, fell at Paul's feet and asked the famous question: **"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"** Paul answered, **"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."** He went on to share the good news of Jesus Christ with him and then to baptize him and all his household.

The miracle of faith happened. Through the gospel in the word and in baptism, God rescued this jailor from the very edge of suicide. But he didn't just rescue him. He rescued his entire household. What would that have meant at that time and place? Almost certainly, it would have meant slaves, men, women and children. And the very word "household" implies a family. He probably had children. He may have had parents and relatives living with him, even married ones with their own children. So, it's almost unimaginable that "household" does not include children, probably very small children, even babies. They were all baptized.

What did all those people need to be rescued from? Not from suicide – Luke says nothing about that for the rest of them. They needed to be rescued from the real problem that even the jailor needed to be rescued from. The same problem that you and I needed to be rescued from: sin and death. Every person in that household eventually was going to die – just like we are, if Jesus doesn't come back first. The reason that we're all going to die is that we are all sinners. Sin kills us here. Sin drags us down to hell.

But Jesus died and paid for the sin that you and I commit every single day. Jesus rose and he declared that we are all forgiven and free. And St. Paul tells us in the book of Romans that in our baptism, we die and we rise with Christ. In our baptism, God glues us to Jesus and we suffer hell on the cross and we die with him and all our sin is paid for. And in our baptism we burst out of that tomb with Jesus, free from sin and guilt, free from death and hell. Yes, it's true that God gives us all those gifts in other ways: in communion, in sermons, in reading our Bibles. He does that in so many different ways so that our sinful hearts can't build up callouses against his message. But he does give it in our baptism. Once in our lifetime he claims us as his own forever. He rescues like a firefighter carrying a baby from a burning building. He did that for you and for me.

II.

That rescue changes us. When I was in high school, my dad and sister and I were in a car accident. We slid into a snowbank and semi ran over our car. It bent the front tires so they were facing each other and it mashed the roof of the car. And all three of us walked away without a scratch. Forty years later, I still remember that. For a few weeks, I thought about it a lot. Being rescued is a profound experience. Well, Jesus rescued us from sin and death and hell. God designed that rescue to change every aspect of our lives, not just for a few weeks, but forever. Baptism is where that rescue takes place for most of us. **Your baptism is about Christ giving you a new life.**

Our baptism rescues from all that sins does to us. All the pain and sorrow of this life will end – we will go to heaven. We will rise from the dead. We will live with Christ forever. And even here, God treats us not as rebels and sinners, but as his own dear children. So he listens, like a Father, to every prayer we offer. He loves us in and he always does what is best for us here. Not that we don't suffer here – Paul and Silas had the skin scourged off their backs and they were chained in a prison, and probably not on comfy chairs. While the jailor later washed their wounds, that didn't make them just go away. They still had to face weeks of pain and healing. Yet, their baptism gave them the strength to endure all that, trusting in their Savior. And it made them rejoice in what came from their suffering: a whole household was baptized and came to faith. A whole jail heard the gospel. Their baptisms meant that they could view their suffering as worth that outcome.

Our baptisms give us a different perspective on pain here. Now, we may not see whole households come to faith through our hurt. We may spend our lives here on this earth wrestling with the loss of people we love or with physical illnesses and pain. We may ask again and again, "Why is God doing this?" and we might have to wait until we get to heaven to get the answer. But St. Paul says that in our baptism we rise to live a new life. Part of that new life is doing what Paul and Silas did when life hurts: it's going back to the gospel for strength. It's reminding ourselves of all that God promises, because that is where his power to heal us is.

That new life changes the rest of our lives, too. We are different now than we would've been without the gospel. Now, lots of unbelievers are nice people. Lots of unbelievers are good friends and scrupulously honest. There is a huge area of life where the difference between an unbeliever and a believer is not in what you see them doing, but in why they do it. A Christian's life is about giving glory to God. So we're nice people and good friends and scrupulously honest because our faith has changed us.

And, of course, there is a huge area of our lives that has to be different from what our world accepts. We have different values, because we follow God. But you know what? Even there, it's not always easy to see the difference because we're still sinners. Sometimes, in our sinful weakness we do the same things and have the same attitudes as the unbelievers all around us. But you know what? The new life God gave us is still real. The new man in our hearts fights against those things. We repent and admit that they were sins and trust in Jesus to forgive us. We rededicate ourselves to living the way God calls us to, even when it's hard to do that.

And we share the good news. That's what Paul and Silas did. That's what the jailor did: his whole household heard the good news because he heard it. His whole household was baptized because he was baptized. The gospel gave them all a new life. It did the same for us. So we, too, share our faith. Yes, it's a struggle sometimes. Yes, we will fight against our own sin our whole lives long. We will commit sins that frustrate us because we know better. We will miss opportunities to talk about Jesus because we're just afraid and we'll beat up ourselves up over that. But the struggle shows that our new man wants to do better. And God's solution is to repent and hear the message of his love. Every time God forgives us for our sin and weakness, he gives us more strength. We may not always think about it, but when we feel guilty, we can remember that we are baptized – we are God's forgiven and perfect children. That, too, gives us strength.

Do you have any good baptism stories? One of our members once told me the story of witnessing her pastor being baptized. Think about that for a second. Your pastor almost always should have been baptized long before he served you. Well, this pastor thought he was baptized as a baby. But he was talking to his catechism class about keeping your baptismal certificate as proof that you were baptized. One of his students asked him if he had his. So, as I understand it, he went home and looked for it. He couldn't find it. He started making phone calls and no one could remember that he was baptized. Perhaps his parents were elderly and no longer capable of remembering. So one Sunday, he was baptized in church in front of his congregation. Now, that's a great baptism story, but not because it's so unusual. It's a great story because that pastor understood that God acts in our baptism. He wanted to have the gift that God gives us in that sacrament. He wanted his congregation to treasure the gift God gave them. Most of us can't tell the story of our own baptism because we don't remember it. But that's OK, because it's not about us. It's not something that's only valid if we can describe our experience. It's the story of God working through the gospel to rescue us and give us a new life. Jesus has given you those gifts. Amen.