

Acts 16:16-34 The Philippian Jailer
John 17:20-26
June 1, 2025

One of the central biblical convictions, stated in clear terms several times on the very first page of the bible, is that *creation is good*. It is a companion conviction of the Christian faith that life is a precious gift, and that, by a strong measure, the good far outweighs the bad. Very few people would say they disagree.

Underneath the surface there is lurking an alternative view. There is actually a fringe ideology which involves the conviction that life is not worth living. It is called, “pro-mortalism.” Even my computer didn’t like the word, it kept changing it to, “pro-moralism,” and putting a red line underneath it as if it was misspelled. The main idea is that life is short and painful and there is on balance more pain than pleasure and more evil than good.

It is pretty easy to criticize the “pro-mortalist” view, and to understand why it is on the margins of things. Most people, and frankly, nearly all people say they disagree with it, although sometimes they complain.

It is more common to suffer, ironically, from a different problem. Rather than to believe that life is devoid of meaning, people believe meaning is to be found in the pursuit of the lesser things in life, a vast array of, “good,” endeavors; everything from pleasurable pursuits, high achievements, to good deeds and charitable giving, even religious devotion, activities

that are thought to produce a feeling of lasting satisfaction, fulfillment.

The bible is also clear in its critique of the latter position. *That there is meaning in life* is accompanied by the conviction that life’s meaning is not to be found in any of the aforementioned pursuits, but rather in a life centered in God, centered in Christ Jesus, who said, among other things;

“If you seek your life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, then you will *find* it.”

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life . . . saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

All other attempts to find purpose and meaning prove futile, and are sometimes characterized by distortion and contradiction, confusion, frustration and exhaustion, and the willingness to ignore the well-being of other people.

This question, about the goodness of life frames the story in the Book of Acts that has been read for us today. We find Paul in Philippi, which is the first European city to which he traveled. It was primarily a

gentile place and had no formal synagogue, but there was a place of prayer where Jewish people met.

On his way there each day, he was encountered by a girl who was a fortune-teller, able to predict the future. Her masters, for she was a slave, sought profit from her abilities. She identified Paul and Silas as servants of the Most High God, for some reason this troubled him, so Paul commanded the spirit by which she was able to predict the future, out, thus, among other things, ending her profitability.

The upshot of all this is that economics prevailed over theology and Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into jail. Interestingly, the girl herself exits the story at this point in favor of the Philippian Jailer, whose predicament is shaped not only that he lived his life in this world of pain and suffering, found himself doing a difficult, and probably thankless, and certainly not uplifting job, but also by an earthquake that opened the gates to the cells and enabled the inmates to go free. Apparently this was the straw that broke the camel's back, he reached for his sword.

Except, of course, that none of the inmates availed themselves of the opportunity. Instead, they remained in their cells, perhaps because of the singing of Paul and Silas, who were having a hymn-sing. Apparently there is no place like jail for a song service.

The jailer himself was responsible for neither their confinement nor the earthquake. He was just, "doing his job," as they say. Nevertheless he felt he had

dishonored himself. He fell back on his de facto mortalist philosophy.

He was surprised that his fears were unfounded, surprised enough to ask after salvation when he realized that he had not dishonored himself after all, that he had been rescued from dishonor. Later the people in charge of Philippi were concerned that they had been mistaken about Paul and Silas and decided to release them after all.

By the way, the word salvation literally means, "to be given life," is actually related to what is a somewhat popular female name, "zoe," life. And thus in the door rushes all those questions about its meaning.

It is quite a world that we live and try to be faithful in. I have mentioned before that most of my life has been lived in peaceful circumstances. There *has* been trouble around me, and sometimes it has drawn near, but for the most part I have been able to enjoy life's beauty and wonder. There has never been for me a situation like the one Paul and Silas faced, nor that of the Philippian Jailer. I am very grateful.

The troubles for *some* have been such that they might feel themselves justified in the opposite conclusion, that the troubles outweigh the pleasures, the evil outweighs the good. They are, however, confronted by the gospel which challenges that conclusion.

It may seem like a high and difficult calling, but Paul and his companion were powerful in the display of

their faith *because* they took the unjust beating with an acceptance and even a joyfulness because they trusted God to be faithful. There is no greater example of this faithfulness than that of Jesus, displayed on the cross.

Today is the last full Sunday in the Easter season, next week is Pentecost, and it is a Communion Sunday, for us observed once each month. It also marks the first Sunday of the One Great Hour of Sharing, which offers the opportunity to help those who have basic needs, which has always been part of the ministry of the church.

It is a time of reflection about the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf and the gift of God's grace, the victory of life over death displayed in the raising of Jesus from the grave. This morning, we make these reflections with the experience of Paul in Philippi, and the story of the Philippian Jailer fresh on our minds.

Let it serve as an inspiration to seek a stronger faith and a higher love, that we might be overwhelmed by the goodness of God in *our* lives, leading perhaps to a re-questioning, "what must I do to be saved?" So that we may be reminded of the answer; believe in Jesus, trust God. It is for us an opportunity for a renewed understanding of God's Grace, and commitment to a faithful life.

In the Gospel of John, we have also heard a text read for us this morning. Jesus praying for us, for we are among those who believe because of the testimony of

the first disciples. He prays for our unity and that the divine love may be in us, as it is in Jesus, as it was in Paul and Silas . . . and as it changed the life of this nameless Philippian Jailer so long ago, whose joy was boundless. So may ours also be.

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