

A Night in Prison — Emancipation.

Acts 16: 6-40.

Night Scenes of Scripture

Seventeen Bible Night Scenes, illustrating and elucidating various truths of the Gospel.

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Chapter 16.

A Night in Prison — Emancipation.

The events related in this sixteenth chapter of Acts have a peculiar interest for us as Gentiles, because, you will observe, this was the first time that the gospel got into Europe. Oh, what infinite mercy that God has sent us the gospel of His grace. The way in which it comes out is exceedingly interesting. The apostle Paul is going on with his work in Asia; he tries to go this way and is hindered, and then he tries to go in another direction and is hindered again, and he does not know what to do. God sends him a vision in the night: he sees a man of Macedonia beckoning to him, and saying, "Come over, and help us." Nothing could be plainer than this: here was a man who felt his need. "Come over, and help us," is the language of a needy man.

Paul wakes up, and evidently understands the vision: "Assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them" (ver. 10). He was at this time at Troas, a large maritime city of Asia Minor, and there gathered assuredly that the Lord would have him preach the gospel in Europe. Immediately, therefore, he goes down to the harbour, and finds a vessel ready to take him over. And God gives him a fair wind, for he gets across in a day and a half, whereas you will find that when he is coming back he takes five days (Acts 20: 6). The Lord loves to send the gospel to sinners, and I think the Holy Ghost delights to record God's readiness to meet the needy soul. There was a hungry heart in Macedonia, a needy sinner, and God orders everything so that His messenger with the gospel of His grace may reach that needy one speedily. Is there a needy soul here tonight? I have glorious news for you, my friend. I delight to tell you that there is not a need in your heart that my Saviour cannot meet; there is not a need of your soul that the Son of God cannot supply, and therefore you need be no longer wretched, peaceless, joyless, if only you will believe God's message.

Well, the voyage is made, and Philippi is reached. Paul and his company go into the city, and they look all around for the man, but they do not see him. They find quite a number of women going to a prayer-meeting, but the men of the place evidently thought that a waste of time. Most young men think it rather a poor thing to go to a prayer-meeting. Well, never mind,

dear women, if you want salvation God has it for you, if the men will not have it. No wonder a blessing came when we find these earnest women constantly going to prayer.

I believe, if we could trace it out, that we should always find that where there is a real work of God's grace it has been preceded by much prayer. I do not gather that there was any set preaching to these women on the part of Paul and his companions. From the words which the evangelist Luke uses it would seem that they had just a little free conversation: "We sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither." I do not know anything better than that. I believe there are far more people converted by earnest Christians sitting down by their side, and having a quiet talk with them, than by sermons from pulpits, or preachings from platforms. The gospel in Europe begins, I do not say with an after-meeting, but with that which has the character of an after-meeting. Sit down by the side of a needy sinner, and tell what you know about Christ — that is what Paul, and Silas, and Luke did here.

The next thing we read is that Lydia's heart was opened. Clearly she received the gospel. I have no doubt that Lydia was an anxious soul, an inquiring one, who knew herself a guilty sinner, but anything she had ever heard up to that moment had not met her soul's need. And if you, beloved friend, have never met the Son of God the Saviour, if you do not personally know the Lord Jesus Christ, there is a want in your heart that nothing but Himself can satisfy. Be sure of this, that let men have what they will here, if they are without Christ, they are unsatisfied. The fact is your heart is too big for the world to fill. Money will not fill it, and pleasure will not fill it. No doubt many go on in a careless, untroubled sort of way, but there is a need, a want, a void in the soul which is never met till Christ is known.

Such a void, no doubt, was in Lydia's heart, and, oh, with what gladness does this simple anxious woman hear the glad tidings of the blessed Saviour, His coming into the world, His life, His death, His resurrection, the descent of the Holy Ghost, the joyful news of forgiveness, and pardon, and peace through His name! Her heart was opened, she drank in the good news, and when her heart was opened, her house was opened too. She received the gospel of Christ into her heart, and she received the servants of Christ into her house (ver. 15). She came boldly out for the Lord; she put on Christ; she was not ashamed to own the Lord; she took the shilling, as we may say, by the river's bank, and she put on the regimentals immediately after. With her household she took her stand as being on the Lord's side. It was a beautiful start for possibly the first follower of Christ in Europe.

She was a godly woman, and very often the women are ahead of the men in the things of God. Very likely in this room there are young men utterly unconverted, who have converted sisters, and praying mothers. The fathers, perhaps, are unconverted too, they are busy making money, and getting on in the world, but, thank God, they have praying wives. May those men be converted tonight, and the boys too! Beware that you do not think lightly of a pious, earnest, prayerful woman; you ought to thank God if you have such in the circle of your acquaintance. Perhaps your conversion to God may be in answer to the prayers of such a woman. Do not make light of it, for mark, if you are not converted to God you will, you must be, damned, for all eternity. I do not mince matters; God does not; for your soul is at stake, and His truth is at stake also.

What did God send Paul to Europe for? To show the way of salvation, and a woman was the first to find it. Lydia, having learnt the way of salvation, immediately ranks herself on the side of the Saviour. She is real; she has the courage of her convictions. Would to God you had! If you are a converted man, or woman, and have never yet truly confessed Christ, the Lord give you grace to do so now. She not only confessed with the lip, but in deed: "She besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us" (ver. 15). I think the heart of the apostle Paul was exceedingly happy when he found himself under Lydia's roof. Thank God, he could say, I have got the first convert in Europe, and the work will now spread; and truly it did.

Now the devil does not like that sort of thing, and if he can hinder the work he will. First he tries to spoil the work by what I may call patronising the apostles. He puts a poor girl, "possessed with a spirit of divination," the slave and tool of Satan, upon the track of the apostles; and day after day she follows them, saying, "These men are the servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of salvation" (ver. 17). The devil tries to mix himself up with God's work, in order to discredit it. It is always so: wherever you find God working, be sure Satan will come in, and try to spoil it. I am afraid most of us would have accepted this girl's testimony, it sounded so fair. But the apostle Paul would not have Satan's help in proclaiming the truth of God.

Lydia had been manifested by the gospel at the river's side, and now this poor slave of Satan must be manifested by the word of the Lord. So Paul "turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour." Immediately there was a great uproar, and why? Because the masters of this poor damsel saw that their money-making had been stopped. When you touch a man's pocket he begins to wince; nothing shows sooner where a man is. The moment these men see that the hope of their gains is gone, they are in a rage, catch Paul and Silas, bring them to the rulers, in the market-place, stir up the people, and put the whole city into a tumult.

I do not doubt Satan thought he had put a stop to the spread of the gospel in Europe when these two servants of the Lord were taken. They received summary justice, and without more ado were stripped, beaten, and handed over to the tender mercies of a brutal, callous man, the jailer of the city prison, who, commanded to keep them safely, "thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks" (ver. 24). This Eastern dungeon was not at all like the prisons of the nineteenth century, but a damp, loathsome place, such as Roman cruelty knew how to prepare in the way of a prison. The jailer takes evidently a sort of brutal pleasure in thrusting God's servants into the inner prison, and then making their feet fast in the stocks.

But this is the man God is going to save. This is the man who is marked out by grace to be truly converted to God. Having effectually secured the servants of the Lord, as he supposed, he left them in this horrible dungeon, with their feet fast in the stocks, and himself retired to sleep. No doubt the enemy thought that the work of the Lord was arrested. But you cannot check the grace of God, or the energy of the Spirit of God, and what looked like a great defeat, became really the opportunity for a wondrous display of divine grace, and the winning of a victory that only God could win.

But midnight approached, and what was heard in that prison? These two men, Paul and Silas, were praying, and singing praises unto God, and the prisoners heard them. If any one had been passing by outside that night, who did not know the circumstances of the case, he would have concluded that they were having a good time in there; but what was the fact? Their feet were fast in the stocks, their backs were sore, and bleeding from the stripes they had received; they were hungry, cold, and comfortless, and yet they were not only praying, but praising. They were exhibiting the character of holy priests, and were soon to act as royal priests. As holy priests they were turning to God in prayer and intercession, and offering up to God praise and thanksgiving. They were able to thank and bless the Lord in the most adverse circumstances.

Now see what followed. God stepped in. It was midnight, and as the other prisoners heard what was going on, these songs of praise going up to God, we can imagine their astonishment. The particular nature or character of their prayer we are not told, but it strikes me very forcibly that it was connected with the testimony of God which they had come to render at Philippi. While others might be buried in slumber, and darkness reigned, the cry of prayer was going up from these two devoted servants of God for the testimony of Christ, and God heard them. He heard their prayer, and He answered it in this remarkable way: "And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed" (ver. 26). God answered the faith and confidence of His servants in this instance by an earthquake, and not only one earthquake, I think, but by two. There was a physical earthquake which shook the prison at Philippi to its very foundations, but this became the means of a moral earthquake in the soul of this poor godless heathen jailer, and he wakes up to find where he is, and what he has been doing.

God had stepped in; the prison was shaken, the doors opened, and every prisoner's bands loosed: "And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself" Have you ever been wakened up? If you have been going on hitherto listlessly, and carelessly in view of eternity, without the forgiveness of your sins, and without the possession of salvation, and of peace with God, you are really asleep, — asleep on the very verge of eternal woe, and I should thank God if anything you may hear tonight could awake you. I should like to be to you tonight like the shipmaster to Jonah when he came and put his hand on him and said, "What meanest thou, O sleeper?" I would say to every careless, unconverted, unsaved soul, that hears me this night, "What meanest thou, O sleeper?" Awake to the reality of your state as a sinner, to the holiness of God, to His righteousness, to His claims upon you, to the realities of eternity. Be roused, if you have never been roused before! You need not be roused by an earthquake. No, it may be by the still small voice in which God often speaks.

God has various ways of waking up a soul. Here in Philippi was a man whose course had been one of ignorance of God, and brutal harshness in the exercise of his prison duties, but God had His eye upon him for mercy. The intervention of the earthquake was undoubtedly a testimony that God was pleased to give in connection with the introduction of the gospel of His Son into Europe, but it was also His direct interposition to reach this man. First he was rudely awakened, and finding the doors open, and every one's bands loosed, he immediately inferred, "The prisoners are all gone, and my life is not worth preserving." The rule that applied to Roman jailers was that the jailer's life went for the life of the prisoner whom he had lost. He concluded

that the prisoners were gone, and his own life therefore forfeited, and he was just on the verge of committing suicide. We are told in history that Philippi was notorious for the number of its suicides. It was quite a common thing for men thus to hurry themselves into eternity, little knowing what lay before them, and here was this wretched jailer about to hurl himself into eternity in all his guilt and godlessness.

But note how beautifully the grace of God interposed. The voice of God's servant, whom he had treated so rudely and cruelly a few hours before, was heard saying, "Do thyself no harm, for we are all here." See the effect upon this man. It was the earthquake that woke him up out of his sleep, yet I do not think it was the earthquake that touched his conscience, but this, that he heard a man, whom he had so lately treated in the most brutal manner, calling to him in the most tender, loving way, and preventing him from taking away his own life, which he otherwise would have done. Is not that a lovely word for every sinner, "Do thyself no harm"? How many are doing themselves harm, fighting against God, fighting against the truth, refusing to bow to Jesus.

That word of affectionate pleading went to the heart of the poor wretched jailer; his conscience was reached, he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas. It was in the darkness that Paul had spoken, and the jailer must have thought within himself: "How in the world could that prisoner know that I was going to make away with myself? How could he know what I was about in the darkness?" He had a sense in his soul that God was there. Had he not heard of the preaching of these men? Had he not heard of Lydia and her household being converted? Had he not heard it proclaimed, "These are the servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of salvation"? He called for a light. When a man begins to think seriously about the concerns of his soul, he always wants light. And I will tell you another thing: I never knew a soul come out of nature's darkness into the light of the gospel, that, as the truth began to dawn upon it, did not say, "I begin to see it."

A young man said to me only yesterday, as I was seeking to put the gospel before him, "I cannot see it." What a soul wants is light from God, and, thank God, He gives light. You have no need to call for it, it is shining before you. The precious Word of God is effulgent with light, both as to the ruin of man, and as to the salvation of God. It unfolds your lost condition, and it unfolds the Saviour and His finished work. The darkness is past, and the true light now shines. The light of the gospel is now for anybody and everybody, it is for whosoever will.

No doubt this poor man was in a great state of trepidation. He came trembling: he was in real exercise: he was an awakened sinner. A little while ago he was a careless sinner, doing Satan's work, but now by the grace of God he became an exercised man in the throes of the new birth, and deeply convicted of his sinful state. Have you ever been convicted? Have you ever gone to God in this condition, seeking light, and trembling with the sense that you have sinned against Him? If not, I beseech you, hear the voice of God's Word declaring that you have sinned, for "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." But, thank God, "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." In the very scene of our sin, and ruin, misery, and degradation, God has stepped in, and brought salvation to us in the Person, and through the work, of His own beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

This awakened, convicted man now brought out Paul and Silas, and put to them the most momentous question that a man could ask, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" He had heard before, no doubt, that these men showed "the way of salvation," but those words had no meaning for him. Now his eyes are opened, his conscience is aroused, he sees that — up to this point he had been on the road to eternal damnation. You must remember that up to this hour he was a poor dark heathen, who had never heard the gospel, who had never heard of Jesus, nor of the love of God, but now, awakened, and convicted, with a sense of his sins pressing on his soul, he cries out, "What must I do to be saved?" Let me inquire of you; have you ever in your soul's history passed through a moment like this? Have you ever got into God's presence, bowed down with a sense of your sins, your guilt, and your need, and put this question that the jailer asked of Paul and Silas? I confess to you that nothing gives me greater delight and joy than to hear this question, the breathing of an agonised sinner, the expression of his soul's desire to get salvation. And, you may depend upon it, it was with gladness of heart that Paul and Silas heard the jailer's query. "What must I do?" he cries, because when a man is awakened, he always supposes there is something he must do, something which must be performed or brought forth by him, to put things right between his soul and God. But let us distinctly get hold of this, that nothing which you or I can do can ever repair the breach between our souls and God. Then can it not be repaired? Yes, thank God, He repairs it from His own side. It is the One who has been sinned against who repairs the breach, and bridges over the distance, so that we can be brought near to Him.

Do you remember, when our Lord Jesus Christ was on earth, that certain Jews came to Him saying, "What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?" (John 6: 28.) And do you remember His answer? "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." The doing is not on our side, it is on God's side; it is Christ's doing, not ours, which brings salvation.

Again, in Romans 3 the question, what a man is to do to be saved, is exceedingly simply answered: "Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? Nay, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified *by faith without the deeds of the law*" (Rom. 3: 27, 28). Then in chap. 4 we read: "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. *But to him that WORKETH NOT, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness*" (Rom. 4: 4, 5). I know of no more remarkable statement in the whole compass of God's Word than that. Works and grace are in absolute contrast. Works would be something on my side; grace is something from God's side.

But what is the jailer told to do? God's answer to man's query is exquisite in its simplicity. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house," falls on the ears of the awakened sinner. How divinely simple. He had only to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and he would be a saved man. There is no word of anything that he must *do* in order to get salvation. This is a gospel that exactly meets helpless sinners without strength, and no wonder the jailer believed at once. His conversion was a rapid one indeed. One minute asleep in his sins, the next awake and deeply anxious about these sins — and straightway thereafter he hears the gospel and believes it, and rejoices in God with all his house.

But some of you say, I do not believe in sudden conversions. Do you not? I do. Most likely you never will believe in sudden conversions till you are converted yourself. Was not this jailer converted suddenly? He puts a plain question, and he gets a straight answer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." It was not himself only, but his household was likewise to come in for God's blessing.

See what an immense difference one word makes. What shall I *do*? cries the jailer. He is not told to do anything but believe. I know that people have got in their heads the idea of being saved by works, but you will find in Scripture that men are not saved by *works*, but by simply hearing and believing. Faith rests on God's Word, faith comes by hearing. Take the history of the conversion of Cornelius the centurion, as related by Peter in Acts 11. Cornelius is told to send to Joppa for Peter, "who shall tell thee *words* whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved." You see, beloved friends, works are what spring from our side, and by works no man was ever justified: words are from God, and it is on God's Word that faith rests: "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10: 17). "Hear, and your soul shall live," says the prophet (Isa. 55: 3). Therefore the answer to the jailer's question is most beautiful: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."

But you might say to me, What did this man know about the Lord Jesus Christ? I do not think he knew anything whatever about Him up to that moment, and therefore the next verse is very important: "And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house." They did not stop with merely saying, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," but unfolded the gospel to him; they brought out the glorious truth of the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Observe, he was not told to believe on Jesus merely, but on the *Lord Jesus Christ*. This is very important, because this full title sets forth what the Saviour is — He is Lord of all, His name is Jesus, which signifies Jehovah the Saviour, and His character is that He is the Christ, the Anointed One of God. From this it follows that He is more than a mere man. Yes, indeed, were He not more than mere man, He would be no Saviour for you and me. If He were not very man He could not stand in our stead, and if He were not the Eternal Son of God He could not rise to the height of God's claims.

I will ask you to turn for a moment to the Old Testament Scriptures, for I wish to show you that the One in whom I want your hearts to confide, while truly a man, is much more than a man. Look at Isaiah 45: "Tell ye, and bring them near; yea, let them take counsel together: who hath declared this from ancient time? who hath told it from that time? Have not I the Lord? And there is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me. Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else." If you are to be saved, it must be by looking to Him. And the next verse shows that every knee will have to bow to Him because He is God: "I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear" (vers. 21-23). Now when I turn to the New Testament I find that the homage which is so distinctly claimed by God, as God, in Isaiah 45, is with equal distinctness to be rendered to the Lord Jesus Christ as man. (See Phil. 2: 5-11.) As man "He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee should

bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

In lowly grace He became a man, but He was a striking contrast to the first man. The first man wanted to be like God, the second Man was in the form of God; it was not an object of rapine to Him to be on an equality with God, but He emptied Himself and became a man. What was apostasy in man, or angels, was perfection in Christ. Adam wanted to rise from manhood to Godhead; he left his first estate — which is apostasy — and, in seeking to get up, fell definitively. Christ emptied Himself, made Himself of no reputation, came down to earth taking a servant's form, and as man, in death accomplished a work by which God is glorified, and sin put away. What happened then? God raised Him from the dead, glorified Him as man, and then declared that at the name of Jesus — the once humbled but now exalted man — every knee should bow. Every created being, angelic, human, or demoniac, must bow to the name of Jesus, and confess that He is Lord. Paul doubtless told this poor jailer of the Person of Christ, of His life, of His death, of His resurrection, of the value of His blood, as well as saying to him, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

Does any one now ask, What have I to do to be saved? Romans 10 furnishes a very simple answer: "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (vers. 9, 10). Are you going to believe God's Word tonight, and confess His Son? Will you yield your heart now to this precious loving Saviour? You could not do better than imitate this jailer. The jailer heard the gospel, "Believe . . . and be saved." He believed, and he was saved. Manifestly he believed with his heart, and confessed with his mouth, for we read: "He took them *the same hour* of the night, and washed their stripes, and was baptized, he and all his, straightway." He did not wait till the morning.

That man wanted salvation, and got it. He asked how he could be saved, heard how he could be saved, and the same night he "rejoiced, *believing in God* with all his house" (ver. 34). He had been told to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ: Scripture here tells us he believed in God, for he had heard who the Lord Jesus Christ was, as well as what He had done. Now he was a converted man, a saved man, a rejoicing man, by simply believing God's message, through His servants, concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. He was an emancipated man. Delivered from the power of Satan, his chains all burst, he was out of prison truly and spiritually, and he at once identified himself with the Lord's servants, and the Lord's work.

What a wonderful change did grace make in that jailer's history. Saved and blessed, he was manifestly on the Lord's side, and his whole life and ways bespoke the radical nature of his conversion. How different the way he dismissed the Lord's servants to that in which he received them. "Depart, and go in peace," are the last words we have from his lips, as in the morning he brought his guests out of his house. The lion had become a lamb. The servant of the devil had become the happy servant of Christ. What emancipation indeed is that which grace brings to sin's captives through the sweet and lovely name of Jesus!