

## When Good Things Go Bad

[Luke 24:44-53](#), [Acts 16:16-34](#)

When I was in ‘Licensed to Preach’ school, I was told a story of the shortest appointment in the history of the United Methodist Church. A young pastor had just completed seminary and was given his first appointment. It was a congregation that dated back almost 150 years. When he arrived at the church for the first time, he noticed a large tree with multiple limbs hanging directly over the sanctuary. The tree was old and convoluted, having bent and twisted to adjust to the environment and conditions over the years. But clearly the tree was a hazard. When the wind blew, several small limbs would pepper the ground. The proximity of the tree to the sanctuary made it clear that if that tree were to fall, the sanctuary would be destroyed. So with that in mind, the young pastor hired a tree company to

safely take down the tree during the week before his first sermon. Little did the pastor know, nor did he bother to find out, that the tree in question was planted by John Wesley himself in honor of the church founders. While the pastor thought he was doing something good, quickly the situation turned sour. The conference decided it was best if he moved on after serving only one week at this congregation.

At times we are completely sure our actions are for the good of all, yet not everyone is pleased with the consequences as we think they should be. This is the case with the account from today's scripture reading from Acts. Paul and Silas were going about doing the work of the church, spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to those in Philippi. The message was being sent to the Gentiles and was being received by the masses. Many were

hearing the gospel for the first time and believing in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. The church was growing in every way.

So it's interesting to see the scripture for today starting with a story of a girl who was possessed by a strange demon and was able to sense the Holy Spirit acting in Paul and Silas. She became a nuisance as she continued to follow them and make loud proclamations that were disruptive. Her message was true, "These men are slaves/servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." It sounds good, doesn't it? That's exactly what Paul and Silas were doing. Yet the reason for this girl's outcries was not to praise God and bring people to Jesus Christ but to make money for her owners. In truth she was probably suffering. Whatever entity that possessed her was controlling her actions and keeping her enslaved. Paul saw this and demanded the demon to leave her – he was doing a good

thing. Perhaps the girl also felt relieved, but her masters were anything but pleased. They had just lost their profit machine. Without her demon, she was no longer a source of income for them.

So in a strange twist, Paul and Silas were brought before a council on trumped up charges from those bearing false witness. Does this sound familiar? Jesus also faced a similar situation. In this case the council ordered Paul and Silas to be stripped of their clothing, severely beaten, and thrown in jail. Many would have died from such a beating, and if not from that from the infection that would set in to unclean wounds. They were placed in the most secure area of the prison and ordered under heavy guard, bound with shackles and chains.

Imagine yourself being in this situation. What are you most likely to be doing? Probably crying and agonizing over the

physical pain, perhaps even cursing God for your predicament.

But Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.

They had been severely beaten, they were bruised and bleeding, and they were chained with their feet fastened in the stocks. Yet

Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God - and the other prisoners were listening.

People will often watch us when we are going through trials. They may wonder how you will respond when things aren't going so well. It is easy to praise God on the mountaintop but it is not so easy in the midst of a deep dark valley, or in this case a cold, dirty prison. Can we cling to our faith when times are hard? When we do good for the sake of the gospel and we are ridiculed for it, can we still sing praises to God? Not everyone will appreciate our message of love and hope in Jesus Christ. Many in this country in particular are a bit calloused

about the message of Christianity. Many are more interested in getting ahead in this life – there is not much concern for eternity or for caring for one another. Can we still praise God when we are faced with serious challenges of lost loved ones or the loss of our physical health? It seems that when things are at their worst, maybe we can dig down and find a measure of hope and faith we didn't know we possessed. Maybe we realize how much we need God to walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death.

But our story doesn't end with Paul and Silas alone in a Roman prison. The scripture tells us that at midnight while they were singing and praising God there was a strange earthquake that only seemed to shake the foundation of the prison. When you read about this earthquake you wonder. We've seen accounts of earthquakes in Haiti and China and Chile – usually

the first thing to go is the roof – it caves in on the rest of the building. But in this case the roof and walls stay intact. Only the chains and shackles are loosened and fall away. Only the doors of the prison swing wide open. God was at work here. Yet once again something good could have gone bad quickly, for the jailer was ready to take his life as punishment for allowing the prisoners to escape.

But God was doing more than freeing his servants. God was moving in the heart of an ardent Roman supporter. Paul cried out for the jailer to stop because although their chains were loosed and the doors were open, God had a plan for Paul and Silas. They were still there. That was the action needed for this jailer to believe in the Most High God. He went to get lights, entered the prison cell, saw Paul and Silas and all the prisoners still present, and asked what he needed to do to be saved. The

jailer and his household became witnesses to the power of God in their lives. They believed in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the one who came to atone for the sins of all – Jews and Gentiles.

How are we at witnessing when we are in our midnight hour? Midnight seems to be a significant time. Wilson Pickett said, “I’m gonna wait until the midnight hour.” Maria Mulduar spent her midnights at the oasis. And we know that Gladys Knight is taking the midnight train to Georgia. What makes midnight so special? Well, midnight is the deepest part of the night because one second after midnight it is a brand new day; it is officially morning. Each year we watch and wait for midnight on December 31, because right after midnight begins a new year. If we can get through midnight, somehow things seem just a little easier. We know a new day is coming.

When we do good things in the name of Jesus Christ we know there is a hand to guide us through our darkest times in life. Not everyone will appreciate our message of hope, but that does not stop us from sharing it. Often we share with our actions during the hard times of life because someone is always watching. How we react when trials come our way could very well influence others. Can we sing hymns and praise God at midnight? Can we still believe God is with us even when everything seems to be hitting us at once? Know there is hope in a dark world. Know that God will see you through all the dark times of your life. And as part of this body of Christ, know that we are here to lift each other up in prayer and praise to God. God is good, all the time. Amen.