

Acts 16:25-34

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. Instantly all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains came loose. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw that the prison doors were opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, because he thought that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted with a loud voice, "Don't harm yourself, because we are all here!" ²⁹The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling in front of Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household." ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to everyone in his home. ³³At the same hour of the night, he took them and washed their wounds. Without delay, he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴Then he brought Paul and Silas into his house and set food before them. He rejoiced, because he and his whole household had come to believe in God.

Sermon for Epiphany 1, January 10, 2021, St. Paul's Green Garden, Michigan

Text: Acts 16:25-34

Theme: "The Gospel Is More Powerful Than An Earthquake"

In the name of Jesus, who gives the gospel its power, dear Christian friends,

Natural disasters have been a part of history ever since the flood at Noah's time. Yet every flood, every volcano, and every fire have always been controlled by God. Of course, in Genesis we have the well-known lesson of how God flooded the entire world with water. Christians have always seen this as a demonstration of God's judgment on sin. Another kind of natural disaster is briefly described for us here in Acts. A severe earthquake occurred on Paul's second mission journey while he was in Philippi.

Now you know that earthquakes are immensely powerful. The 1964 Alaska earthquake is said to have had the power of several atomic bombs. Pictures of the damage done in Seward and Valdez prove that. But I submit that the power of an earthquake was **not** the only power that was being exerted that night in the prison at Philippi. The jailor of Philippi experienced not only the spectacular, terrifying power of this earthquake, but a much more wonderful power, the muscle of the

gospel. Even though the earthquake was powerful, the gospel of Jesus Christ was greater in this man's life. In a series of comparisons this morning you and I are going to discover something that seems impossible to us, but it is quite true. The gospel is more powerful than an earthquake.

Paul and his fellow missionary Silas had been sent to start churches in other parts of the world. Through a vision, the Lord led them to Macedonia, near the modern day country of Greece. Some time after they arrived, they were put in prison because Paul had cast a demon out of a girl whose owners made money from her ability to tell the future. Paul and Silas were put into the middle of the prison, and locked up with chains probably on their hands and feet. In the middle of the night the two missionaries were praying and singing hymns of praise to God. They were content to let the Lord carry out his plans for them. What they didn't know is that his plans included a jolting earthquake.

This quake had some real power. “**Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken.**” This quake had enough power to shake the foundations of the prison where they were held captive. Pictures of the '64 earthquake show buildings tilted in a different directions as if they had no foundation. Of course, they did but their foundations had been violently shaken and damaged. The earthquake here in Acts had the power to shake the prison foundations, and that is force but it is destructive force. The gospel had a much different effect in the life of jailor.

When the quake hit the jailor had likely been asleep. His own home was surely damaged. Imagine the bed rolling as if it were on the deck of a ship in a storm. Dust is falling down from the rafters. The foundation of the house has probably cracked. He knew what was happening at the prison and he was responsible to keep the prisoners from escaping. But what had really been shaken here was not simply the prison foundations. The foundation of this man's life had been shaken. We don't know if he bowed down to false gods. We don't know if he worshiped anything at all. But **he knew** that his life was in danger and could not protect himself. False gods could not protect him. What was worse he did not know where he would go if he died. How would he find protection from this danger? And if he died what would protect him in eternity? This man found nothing could help him—not a false god, not the Roman government, not his own strength and power. The power of this earthquake had taken away the foundation of this man's life.

But can you see the power of the gospel here? When the jailor took the missionaries out of the prison to his home, we are told, “**They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to everyone in his home.**” Through the power of the earthquake the Lord had knocked out the false foundation of their lives and now replaced it with the sure foundation of Jesus, and his forgiveness for all their sins. This man probably ordered horrible mistreatment for prisoners such as Paul and Silas. We know they were beaten. We can only imagine the kinds of sins that burdened this man’s conscience. And had no excuses, not even because of his position as a jailor. This earthquake caused him to question everything he had believed about his gods and whether or not they loved him. Paul and Silas showed him that Jesus took away all the sins that tormented him.

What have you made the foundation of your life? Does money, fun or your work or your recreation form the base of your life? Do you depend on your children or your family to give your life meaning? What if God threatened to take all those things away? Family, money, recreation or popularity are foundations that crumble because they don’t have any answer for my sins and they don’t tell me that God loves me. The power of Jesus’ forgiveness builds a real foundation for your life, a foundation that no earthquake can shake. You are Jesus’ forgiven child, you have a place that belongs to you by his side in heaven.

Even after I have seen pictures of the damage done by an earthquake, especially the one in Alaska in 1964 it is hard to believe that so much destruction can be done. I wonder how many people thought about the power and strength of God in that quake. Because even though the power of God is behind the earthquake, there is no quake that can even come close to the power of God. When the jailor at Philippi saw the effects of this quake he must have known that he was seeing the might of a being much greater than he. An earthquake can cause us to see the mighty power and awesome force of God. But no earthquake can tell you anything about the tender mercy of God for you in Jesus. A man named John Newton who lived in the 1700's had quite a series of earthquakes in his life.

John’s mother brought him up as a Christian until she died shortly before his 7th birthday. His father was a sailor and John eventually became a sailor as well. During his early years as a sailor he cursed and misused God’s name, he made fun of God and the Christian faith. But then John experienced God’s earthquakes, a series of severe illnesses, and in one case mistreatment at the hands of someone who should have taken care of him while sick. He and his crew were nearly lost at sea in a badly damaged ship as winter came on. Through all these things and more John Newton survived. He eventually became aware that his life had been foul

and sinful that he was unworthy of the mercies he had received from God. He began to search the scriptures and eventually, through the years he found the answers he was looking for. He found that God loved him because of his undeserved love. And he showed his love through all those earthquake experiences in his life. He could see that God had supplied something better in his life, Jesus Christ and his life-changing power and love. It actually took many years but John could finally see, that since Jesus Christ had changed him on the inside, he needed to change on the outside also. For the last 28 years of his life he was pastor at St. Mary's church in London. During that time he composed the hymn we know well as "Amazing Grace." The jailor, John Newton, you and I, your next door neighbor, your wayward son, daughter, nephew, brother or sister have all been given God's grace. Will we receive it in faith?

When the jailor at Philippi saw the effects of the earthquake on the prison he despaired. The doors were wide open, the building was badly damaged. Maybe it wasn't even ON its foundation any longer. In his mind's eye he thought all the prisoners would easily and quickly escape. That meant only one thing for him. He would be put to death. It was considered far more honorable among the Romans to admit one's guilt and commit suicide than to face the judgment of the law. This jailor believed he had no purpose for living. It seemed to him as though the earthquake had taken away any purpose he might have had. He might as well end his own life he thought.

But when Paul the missionary saw the jailor draw his sword he shouted, "Don't harm yourself, we are all here!" Paul knew that this man had a lot to live for and Paul wanted the chance to tell him about it. By the grace of God this man seemed to know Paul had something that was more powerful than an earthquake. He asked, "**Sirs, what must I do to be saved.**" Paul's answer pointed the jailor to Jesus. He wanted this Philippian to know that there was nothing he could do to save himself. Jesus was more powerful than an earthquake. Paul and Silas had the chance to tell the man and his whole family about the power of Jesus to heal them from their sins. And because of that Paul surely told them that Jesus has the power to give them a purpose for living. What the earthquake seemed to take away, Jesus gives. The gospel *does* have greater power than an earthquake.

What made the jailor believe that he had no reason to live? It was fear. Fear can do the very same thing to you and me, too. When we aren't doing very well in school, when we don't seem to have very many friends, when we are having many challenges with our money, when our sins threaten to cause our lives to crumble,

Jesus has the power to put our lives back together and give us a reason to live. When you aren't doing well in school, Jesus says *I love you even when you make mistakes, even when you often fail to put forth your best effort. What's more, I have forgiven you.* Jesus says to you, *I am your friend always, even when you are unlovable.* When the money just doesn't seem to be there to cover

Page 5

your bills Jesus says, *“Trust me. I will give you all that you need. I know your purpose for living and I want you also to know your purpose for living—to serve me, not to worry about money.* And friends, only Jesus is there when your sins bite you back. He says, *“Leave your sins behind. I have suffered, I have died. Your sins are no more. I give you my Father's word on it.”*

And as if to give that last seal of assurance Acts adds a final thought to this account. The '64 earthquake caused a destructive tidal wave to come crashing ashore. A tidal wave of despair must have engulfed this jailor. Now Paul had told him that Jesus took away his despair and replaced it with his forgiveness, and his compassionate love. But what this man was about to find out is that Jesus replaces the tidal wave of our despair with a wave of his own. **“At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.”** Now this man and all his loved ones had the name of Jesus on them. They were members of his family—holy and pure. Satan could no longer lay claim to them. Acts tells us, **“The whole family was filled with joy because they had come to believe in God.”** An earthquake is powerful but it cannot even come close to the power of the gospel.

Has not the gospel's power brought you into God's family also? Hasn't he put his name on you at holy baptism? Hasn't he told you that you are washed clean and made alive again by the power of God's word in baptism? In baptism, God's gospel floods you with good news and puts to rest the earthquake of your sorrow and sinful despair.

My dear friends, now you know you never need to fear an earthquake again. Our sins, our troubles, our sadness, even an actual earthquake itself cannot shake us. Those things may have power in our lives, but the gospel about Jesus has more power. Receive his power for you in faith. And when you know that you are at the end of your rope, then let Jesus show you just how the power of the gospel can lift you up and carry you above every trouble. Amen.