

## The Power of God to Salvation

### Acts 16:25-34

By Phillip G. Kayser 3-3--2008

Dan Cormie says that there are three kinds of Christians. 1) There are Row-Boat Christians who really want to live the Christian life, but who struggle on in their own power. And after growing weary, they stop to rest awhile, only to find that the current has taken them back to where they started. 2) Then there are Sail-Boat Christians (often the same people at another point in life) who let the wind do all the work. They enjoy times when they experience the power of God in their souls, but what happens when the doldrums come and the wind is taken out of their sails? 3) Then there are the Steam-Powered Christians. They take the water of the Word and combine it with the fire of the Holy Spirit and there is constant power no matter what the conditions! And they are always moving forward. And while that illustration has some limitations, it gets across the point that Christians must start, continue and end with the power of God.

A good chunk of this sermon will be illustrating what Paul (in Romans 1:16) calls “**the power of God to salvation.**” That is a marvelous phrase! It takes Almighty power to turn sinful hearts to God in salvation. *Every* Christian has tasted of that power. Ephesians 1 says that we “believe according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand...” (vv. 19-20). We believe according to the working of His mighty power. So every Christian has already tasted of the supernatural. He starts off as a Steam-Boat Christian.

But God’s power to salvation doesn’t stop with regeneration, faith and justification. Five times Paul applies that phrase to our ongoing life of faith in Christ. As Paul told the believers in Corinth, **that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God** (1 Cor. 2:5). And in chapter 1, verse 18 Paul told the Corinthians that while some people think the cross is foolishness, to us who believe it is the power of God. It is transforming and empowering. And I think that Acts 16, verse 25 definitely illustrates that Paul and Silas had this power of God to salvation as a continuing reality in their lives. The Gospel needs to be lived out every day.

Then (third stage) Paul indicates that in our glorification and throughout eternity “**we shall live with Him by the power of God.**” And so we must start, continue and end with the power of God. Today we will see

that this passage testifies to the power of God in many different ways. And I trust it will be an encouragement to you.

## I. Testimony to the power of God's grace (v. 25)

Look at verse 25. **But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.** This is a remarkable verse. There are three things that I want you to notice here. First, the word "But." It's contrasting their upbeat spirits with their horrible circumstances. To someone looking on it may have seemed like a paradox. They had received a severe caning in verses 22-23. Verse 22 says that the magistrates **commanded them to be beaten with rods.** The plural for "rods" indicates that there was more than one person who was hitting at them with full force with these rods. And the caning must have lasted for a while because verse 23 says **they laid many stripes on them.** Stripes are welts, split skin, bruises or wounds where the rods had done damage to the tissues. Their torsos and legs are probably covered with these stripes. They are miserable from the beating. Then they are thrown into the jail. And don't think of their jails like our modern jails that have toilets and running water. When you are in the stocks, you can't go to the bathroom at your convenience. You wet yourself, and if you are there for quite a while, you likely soil yourself. So the cell they are thrown into is probably reeking from urine drenched ground from previous prisoners. And the stocks themselves are miserable. After a couple hours, your joints and muscles are killing you from the cramped positions. They can't sleep. So that word "But" shows a striking contrast.

The second thing I want you to notice is what the power of God to salvation enables Paul and Silas to do: **But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God...** They weren't cursing their jailers. They weren't grumbling and groaning. They had plenty to groan about, but they were praying to the God of all power and praising the God of all power. How can they be so upbeat? They know a secret: complaining leads to more misery while praise and thanksgiving helps us live above our circumstances. I see praise as the power switch to enter the realm of the supernatural. They didn't feel like praising God. But praise is a kind of faith, and it is in the act of praise that we often experience God's supernatural. And it takes faith to pray and praise in such circumstances, but unless we exercise such faith, we will experience bitterness against people, circumstances and God Himself. You've only got two directions you can go when you've had a caning: to start feeling sorry for yourself and begin

complaining or to trust God and start praising. When you buy toys for your children, usually they say, “Batteries not included.” But that is not true of the life that God has given us. Batteries are always included. But God does expect us to turn on the switch to power through faith. And where grumbling turns off faith, prayer and praise is one of those things that deliberately moves the power switch to “ON.”

The third thing I want you to notice is that verse 25 says, **and the prisoners were listening to them.** Every day we have all kinds of people who are looking at us, listening and watching. They want to see what kind of sermons your scars are preaching. It’s easy to preach a good sermon when everything is going great, but what does your life preach when you are bloodied, treated poorly, misunderstood, slandered, and hurt? Those are the circumstances that Matthew 5 calls us to rejoice in as evidence that we are sons. How do we respond to our difficulties? Is it a testimony to the power of God to salvation? If your miserable circumstances produce negativity, complaining, and grumbling under your miseries, you are preaching a different sermon than Paul and Silas preached. You are preaching the sermon that ancient Israel (in the time of Moses) was judged for over and over again in the Old Testament. God said that their grumbling evidenced their lack of faith. And the just must live by faith.

Let me tell you a little secret. Fear is very much like faith. In fact, it is the evil twin of faith. Where faith is the title deed of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen, fear is the same, but it is the title deed and evidence of things dreaded. Both faith and fear demand to be fulfilled. Scripture says that what you fear will come upon you. That’s why we have to cast off fear. And many of us need to adjust our attitudes because when we expect the worst, the worst will indeed come upon us. So fear and complaining is the evil twin of faith. Praise and thanksgiving breaks that cycle and ushers us into living by faith.

Christians have written some of the finest hymns in the moment of their darkness. Fannie Crosby was blinded by a doctor’s foolish mistake – putting a mustard plaster on her forehead to cure a cold when she was a kid. And it blinded her. But she never became bitter. She thanked God for her darkness that forced a dependence upon God that brought great inner light. Her hymns are marvelous testimonies of the power of God to salvation in her life. Horatio Spafford’s song, “It is Well with My Soul,” is a song that often brings tears to my eyes because it demonstrates to me that this power of God to salvation was not just theory, but it was lived out in his life. His real estate investments were a complete financial loss in the great Chicago fire of 1871. They all burned down. He lost almost everything. Only a short

time before this his only son died. D.L.Moody invited him to come to Europe with him. Last minute business prevented him from taking that ship, but he sent his wife and four daughters on it. The ship was rammed by an English vessel and sank in 12 minutes. All four daughters were drowned. When his wife cabled him about the news, he took the next ship over. As he was crossing the place of the disaster he felt the overwhelming sorrow especially deeply, but he chose to cast His burdens upon the Lord, to believe that God cared for Him, and to begin praising Him. And that night God's grace sustained him and he wrote these words:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll,  
Whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say,  
It is well,  
It is well with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet  
Though trials should come  
Let this blest assurance control -  
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate  
And has shed his own blood for my soul.

Some people don't do that. Sometimes grief so grips a person's vision that he can't see God's goodness and it makes him bitter, angry, frustrated, dissatisfied and envious. Yet you see other people with just as much tragedy in their lives with great joy – supernatural joy. In one Asian country, as I looked at the stripes, burns and broken bones on the bodies of saints who had been tortured for their faith, I told the Lord that I want their supernatural joy and that I am determined to praise Him as they do in the worst of circumstances. There are times that I still blow it and start to complain. And complaining just makes you more miserable. And I repent and start to praise. And during the times that I take the step of faith to praise God, I have found His supernatural power rising within me to scatter any beginnings of bitterness. It's preaching the Gospel to yourself throughout your life. And I urge you to switch ON the power of God to salvation. It does deliver. There *are* batteries included, but they don't do you much good if the switch of faith is turned off. There are many expressions of faith, but praise and thankfulness are powerful ones. Try it. Try it even when you do not feel like it. And your praise will turn from a hollow note (and it almost always starts as a hollow note) to a deeply felt and renewed gratitude to God. As Lamentations 3 says in the midst of horrible calamity that Jeremiah experienced: **Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because**

**His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I hope in Him!”**

## **II. Testimony to the power of God’s providence (v. 26)**

Roman numeral II gives us more reasons to have joy. Verse 26 testifies to the power of God in providence. **Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were loosed.** That’s a might strange earthquake if you ask me. It shakes the foundations, but the walls don’t cave in. It opens every door and loosens every chain on every prisoner’s body, but it is selective – it doesn’t cave the roof in on their heads. It comes at just the right time to shake up the jailer. God’s timing is impeccable. If the earthquake had come before Paul and Silas prayed and sang he might have chalked it up to coincidence because there were lots of earthquakes in that region. But there was something supernatural about this natural event. God controls the very earth to prepare a jailer to receive salvation. And the fact that every prisoner’s chains fell off may be a hint that God had prepared their hearts to be the core of this new church that was forming too. I suspect that this was the prelude to their salvation, and that’s why they didn’t try to escape. They wanted to hear more. They could have easily escaped.

Does God still cause nature to conspire together for His purposes? Absolutely, yes. Deuteronomy 28 guarantees it. Ephesians 1 says that God is controlling all things in this universe according to His eternal plan. Romans 8:28 guarantees that all things are working together for our good. Proverbs 16:33 says that even **the dice are thrown into the lap, but their every decision is from the LORD** (NET). The lot or the dice was the symbol of chance, but that passage indicates that there is no chance from God’s perspective. It may seem random and by chance to us, but every time you throw the dice in a monopoly game, God determines the outcome. (Now be careful - you can’t manipulate God by using dice, but He controls the outcome. That’s one good reason to not even bother gambling.) God ordains every molecule of dust that you breathe in. 1 Corinthians 10:13 guarantees that God is in such control over our circumstances that we will never be placed in a situation that is beyond our ability to cope, but that He will make a way of escape, that we may be able to bear it. Those are all testimonies to God’s power in providence. And He continues to use Providence for His glory and the salvation of His elect.

### III. Testimony to the power of God's humbling work (vv. 27-30)

#### A. *God can destroy humanistic hope (v. 27)*

And I want us to spend some time looking at the way God's power was at work in saving this hardened soldier, because I think it can give us encouragement that God's hand is not too short to save even the toughest of people, and to change even the toughest of people. I know people who think that Christianity is a crutch, and they have confidence that everything is all right in their world. I'm sure that this jailer who has seen it all, and has been hardened by it all, was in that same boat. He didn't think he needed God. He was sleeping soundly. But in an instant God makes his world come crashing down. When he feels the earthquake, he comes running out of his bedroom and to his horror he sees every door ajar. That's a bad sign. He runs up to the main cell, and it is all dark. Since he doesn't hear a sound, he assumes that all the prisoners have fled. Verse 27 says, **And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself.** Why would he commit suicide? Well, he knew that he was in mighty deep trouble. Guards were held personally responsible for their prisoners, and if they let prisoners escape, they could suffer the same punishment all the way up to death. The pain and shame that he might face was more than he could bear. He preferred death at his own hands than the kind of death that might be inflicted by his superiors. But the point that I want to make is that a man brought to suicide has lost all hope. And any hope he had before was humanistic hope. Humanistic hope must be destroyed before people are ready to put their hope in God. This is why it is so difficult for rich people to become Christians. And yet Christ said, "With God, all things are possible." This is the beginning of God's powerful humbling work in this man.

God knows where an unbeliever's hope lies. If his hope is in his money, God can make his stocks crash. If his hope is in his family, he can make that fall apart. If his hope is in a job promotion, he can get him demoted. It only took an earthquake to shake this man up. But the testimonies of new believers shows that God has been very creative in their lives to remove all hope. God has shaken people up with sickness, pain, mental illness, social shame, incarceration, addictions and many other things. God can do it to your loved ones. And rather than instantly being there to bail them out and protect them from what God is doing, ask them if God is at work in their lives. Yes, show sympathy and help. But ask them if

God is trying to get their attention. “It seems like God is really beating up on you recently.”

**B. God can remove humanistic solutions (v. 28)**

Verse 28 – **But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, “Do yourself no harm, for we are all here.”** Would it have been legitimate for Paul to escape? Yes. Earlier in Acts Peter escapes from jail. He feels no need to stick around and chat with the guards. No, he is out of there as quick as could be. But God obviously moved Paul to not escape. And He moves Paul to stop this attempted suicide. Suicide is not a great escape. When pagans commit suicide they are going from one troubled situation into a far worse place. It’s a humanistic solution that does not work and that needs to be removed.

Your friends may have their own humanistic solutions to escape from pain. It may be going to a shrink. It may be drugs. It may be sitting in front of the TV eating Doritos. It may be a Playboy lifestyle. But whatever the humanistic solutions, God knows how to remove them. Be confident in that.

**C. God can produce reverence (v. 29)**

Third, God knows how to produce reverence and fear of Him. Verse 29 says, **Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.** He didn’t just shut the doors and say, “Whew! That was a close one. They almost escaped.” No, he knows something weird is going on. He is scared and confused at what is happening. But he sees the confidence and supernatural joy of Paul and Silas, and he knows he needs what they have. God instills at that moment a proper reverence for Him.

**D. God can open spiritual eyes (v. 30)**

And the final work of humbling comes as God opens spiritual eyes to see how much of a sinner he really was. The jailer doesn’t need salvation from Roman punishment. That’s already been forestalled. There’s something else going on here. Verse 30 says, **And he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”** He’s talking about salvation from sin and from hell. He’s talking about salvation from his bondage to self and to Satan. It takes a humbling work for people to even recognize that they need salvation. Most people don’t even think they need to be saved. The message sounds foolish to them. But God’s power can bring them to that place. Were the songs that were sung and the prayers that were uttered part of the opening of his eyes? We aren’t told. But God has the jailer just where he needs to be in order to come to faith.

## IV. Testimony to the power of God's saving work (vv. 31-34)

### A. *Faith, not self-effort (v. 31a)*

And that's point IV – this is a testimony to the power of God's saving work. His question still has some self-effort involved in it. The jailer asks, "What must *I do* to be saved." And Paul's response is one of the most insulting things you can say to a self-sufficient person – believe. Believe something that someone else has done. Believe in a finished work. Believe that you can't do anything. But believe. Verse 31 – **So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.** There is no salvation when we believe in ourselves, or when we believe in our parents. Our faith must rest upon Jesus Christ. It is an amazing thing to think that a mere trust in Jesus would wipe away an entire life time of sins, and would not only save us, but would lead to the salvation of our entire family. But this is the audacious promise that Paul and Silas give. Believe. Personal salvation speaks of grace, not self-effort.

### B. *Salvation of entire families (v. 31b)*

Family salvation speaks of grace and not self-effort. His children don't deserve salvation any more than the jailer did. Yet as faith turns on the power switch, the lights come on not only in his soul, but they come on within the whole family. Amazing grace! Amazing grace!

### C. *Instilling a new interest in the Word (v. 32)*

But God's power continues to make changes. Where this man had zero interest in the Word of God prior to this moment, suddenly, in a moment of time he has an intense interest in the Bible. Where he had been sleeping through their singing, he is now wide-awake. Verse 32 – **Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.** 1 Peter says that God's power produces hunger in every brand new baby Christian. But he also exhorts us to turn on the switch to such hunger for the Word as we get older. That hunger can wane. 1 Peter 2:2 says, **as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.**

### D. *A new love for the brethren (v. 33a)*

Verse 33 shows that God's power to salvation also produced a new love for the brethren. It says, **And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes.** This was a man who was used to pain and suffering all around him. I doubt very much that it bothered him any more to



see prisoners in excruciating pain. He had no doubt been involved in inflicting such pain on the prisoners himself. So where did this new concern and love and tenderness come from? God's power produced it. He was instantly given compassion and love for the brethren. 1 John 3 says, **Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother... We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love *his* brother abides in death...** (1 John 3:10,14). This is a new love that God has instantaneously produced by His power. And God wants us to experience the supernatural power of love for the brethren throughout our lives.

### ***E. A new life (v. 33)***

The jailer was also ushered into a new life through baptism. It says, **And immediately he and all his family were baptized.** Baptism initiates people into the church; into a new life, a new kingdom, new powers, new privileges. He is no longer a foreigner. He is no longer an alien from the covenants of promise. God has ushered him in. God has put His seal of baptism upon Him and set Him aside from the world. He is called to a new life.

### ***F. A new fellowship (v. 34a)***

Verse 34 speaks of a new fellowship. **Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them...** Fellowship is not fundamentally simply hanging out together. The Biblical term fellowship always has within it the idea of sharing something with others. It could be sharing food, money, energies, counsel or something else. And God has placed within this man not only a desire to serve his new friends (which he did by washing their backs), but to share the things of life with his new friends. That's a powerful work of God's grace to take a person from having self-absorbed interests and self-serving interests into the kind of serving and fellowship that we witness here. Every new believer is given this by God's grace. We are ushered into the fellowship of the brethren. The book of 1 John is clear on that. It says, **But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?** So every new believer starts out with this fellowship. But it is easy for this fellowship to grow dull over time and to miss the power of God's grace. Turning the switch to "ON" might simply mean stepping out into an act of fellowship when you don't feel like it, and finding God filling your heart with a renewed interest in this fellowship of the saints.

But it is imperative that we continue to live in the power of the cross throughout our lives.

### **G. A new joy (v. 35b)**

Next we see this man filled with joy. **And he rejoiced, having believed in God...** What's to rejoice in? God didn't protect Paul and Silas from a severe beating. They are still in pain. There is no indication that they were healed. The guard has to tend to their wounds. They are still in jail. There is nothing outwardly to call forth such joy. What does this jailer see? God *did* protect the jailer from death, but the man at that time *preferred* death to what he feared. No, this goes beyond rejoicing in circumstances. It says, **He rejoiced, having believed in God.** There is a relationship between his faith and his joy. And God instilled that joy within him. When God gave Him faith, it was an instant turning on of the switch of joy. Hebrews 3:6 calls us to persevere in that joy throughout our lives, and we do so by faith. It tells us to **hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.** The same faith that began our joy is a faith that can continue to fight for joy (as Piper words it in one of his books).

### **H. An infectious joy (v. 35 – see Greek, ESV, Weymouth)**

The last thing that we see God's power producing is an infectious joy in the lives of others. The New King James is a bit misleading here. It implies that his whole household believed. They may have, but the Greek doesn't say so. It indicates that his belief was producing joy not only in his life but also producing joy in the family. Here is how the ESV translates it – **Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.** The whole household is rejoicing that he had believed. They see something different. There is no reference to the faith of the household. So why does the New King James translate it this way? Here's the translator's notes for the New English Translation (and it's probably the same reasoning for our version): "A formal equivalence translation [that's a literal word for word translation] would have 'and he rejoiced greatly with his entire household that *he* had come to believe in God,' but the reference to the entire household being baptized in v. 33 presumes that all in the household believed." And so a Baptist theology made them change things around here. But the point is not to talk about baptism (even though there is a lot that I could say about that – I'm just going to leave that be). The point that I want to make here is that the jailer's faith produces something *not only in himself* but it *also produces something in his whole family*. When the head of

a household believes, there are profound ramifications for the whole household. When the power of Satan is broken in the life of the head of a family, Satan's suffocating hold over the whole family is broken off. They can sense the difference. The atmosphere is lightened. As this man weeps for joy and laughs for joy and praises God for joy, the joy becomes infectious for the family. And it may be that Baptists are right in assuming that they probably also all believed. That's a very natural outcome within God's kingdom. But I just want to stick to the Greek in emphasizing that his faith produced an infectious joy.

And it is that kind of infectious joy that each of you should desire. It does not flow from your circumstances. It flows from the throne of God. It is part of Christ making all things new in the believer's life. It is part of that power of God to salvation. This is why I emphasize the importance of knowing your God if you are to continue to know this power. Intimacy with Christ is the first of the five C's of healthy leadership that we train people in. Without Christ, you can't fully know community. Without community, your Character is stunted. Without Christ, Community and Character, your Calling is shallow. And without Christ, Community, Character and Calling, your Competencies that you are learning will be derailed. But it must all flow from Christ. Daniel 11:32 says, **Those who do wickedly against the covenant he shall corrupt with flattery; but the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits.** The people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits.

Brothers and sisters, all of us have experienced times when we are Row Boat Christians – living Christianity in our own strength. It gets old rowing upstream sometimes and we find ourselves going backwards. All of us have experienced times when we are Sail Boat Christians. That's an improvement. But it gets old fluctuating between times of spiritual power and times of despair and despondency. This sermon is a call for unbelievers to become Steam-Boat Christians, and it is a call for old Christians to become Steam-Boat Christians who daily experience the power of God to salvation.

How do we do that? We turn on the switches of faith that we have talked about. Hebrews 11 speaks of some of those switches and it adds others. By faith Abraham left his country not knowing where he would be going. That can be a scary thing to do, but faith rejects fear and therefore does not inherit what fear dreads. Instead, faith inherits what God promises. By faith Sarah conceived. Did she have her times of blowing it? Absolutely yes. But she accessed the supernatural through the action of faith. Every example of faith in Hebrews 11 is an action that takes God at His Word. And

the prayers and praises in this chapter of Acts 16 were similar actions of faith. I am absolutely convinced that complaining was tugging at the hearts of Paul and Silas. They are human too. But they kicked it into the corner as the filthy demon that it was and instead embraced the Holy Spirit's call with forgiveness, praise and thanksgiving. And it was as they did so that they experienced God's power coming through. Will you be people of faith? Every day that you exercise the faith of this passage you will experience the continuing reality of the power of God to salvation. May it be so, Lord Jesus. Amen.