

Broken Chains

“Don’t harm yourself!” These are the words that broke my chains. It’s funny really – because I was used to putting other people into chains, depriving them of their freedom, punishing the guilty – while all the time I was as guilty as hell and I certainly wasn’t free.

At that time I was a prison officer. I was actually the head prison officer in charge of the city jail. It was a good job for an ex-army man like myself. After campaigns in the East I had ended up in Macedonia. That’s the country Alexander the Great came from – a good place for an ex-soldier to live. In fact I’d been granted land in the city named after Alexander’s father, Philip. The name Philip means “Friend of horses” and that attracted me to the city, because you see I’d always liked horses, growing up as I did on a farm. I always thought it was shame to see so many of these beautiful animals killed in battle.

Another reason it was good to live in Philippi was the fact that it was a Roman colony ruled by Roman law. As Roman citizens we could be sure of fair treatment (or so I thought then). I was proud of being a Roman and I was proud of our law, although I have to admit it sometimes became a little depressing always having to deal with the people who fell foul of the law. I know some people were acquitted, but I had to deal

mainly with those who had been punished or were being held awaiting punishment. Prison itself was not regarded as a punishment, although being chained up in prison was no holiday, believe me! In fact it was sometimes used by the authorities to extract confessions. But punishment proper was carried out by special officers called *lictors* whose badge of office was the *fascēs* – the tools of their trade – an axe in a bundle of rods – the rods for beating, the axe for execution.

I didn't like the axe. There was something very cold-blooded and final about it. It spoke of death. And that was one thing I didn't want to think about. You might think that strange in an ex-soldier who witnessed death more times than I can count. I suppose part of it was that it's one thing killing a man in combat where he is trying to kill you, it's another thing entirely killing a defenceless man.

But it's more than that. I said I witnessed death many times. That's not strictly true. I saw many people *dying*. That's different. I wasn't afraid of dying. It's death I was afraid of. What do I mean? Well, dying is the physical process – your head being cut off, or your blood gushing out. We've all got to die some day – in our beds or on the battlefield, by disease or violence or old age. That's not what bothered me. I wasn't scared of pain. It's what happened afterwards that bothered me.

What is death? Is it a gateway to somewhere else? And if so, what?

It depended where you looked for an answer. If you went to the old myths they told us that all went to the shadowy underworld of Hades. But one of the greatest of the Greek Philosophers said, "He who has lived all his life in justice and holiness shall go, when he is dead, to the Islands of the Blessed, and dwell there in perfect happiness out of the reach of evil; but he who has lived unjustly and impiously shall go to the house of vengeance and punishment, which is called Tartarus." But how can we know if we have lived lives that are just and holy enough? How can we know if we are at peace with the gods?

Others talk of being initiated into mysteries which will assure us of a blessed afterlife, ascending into heavenly realms and even becoming stars. Still others say all of these are old wives tales and death is simply the end. After that we cease to exist. Somehow that is just as difficult to accept. And who are we to believe?

Apart from these morbid thoughts which assailed me from time to time, life was proceeding as normal. Before the day of my freedom came, there were only two things out of the ordinary that happened. The first was that I had a dream. I can't remember how the dream began. All I can remember is that I was troubled. Then I saw this man lying asleep in his bed. He seemed

a long way away. For some reason I was convinced he could help me. I found myself crying out "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" At first he didn't seem to hear me, but then he sat bolt upright in bed and looked intently at me. I couldn't see his face clearly, only his eyes. Then I suddenly woke up. At first the dream was vivid in my mind and I wondered what sort of portent it was, but gradually as the days passed and I was busy in the prison, the vision faded from my mind.

The second thing happened one day as I was hurrying along the street back to the prison. A girl was screaming at some men. At first I couldn't make out what was happening, but as I got closer I recognised her. She was well known in the city as a fortune-teller. It was believed she was a Pythoness under the influence of the god Apollo who gave oracles at Delphi. She was a slave girl, and I don't know about fortune-telling, but she certainly made a fortune for her owners! I often felt sorry for her. She seemed demented, possessed even. I suppose she was.

Anyway she was following these men and quite a crowd was gathering, pointing and laughing, but it was what she was shouting that struck me. She was pointing at them and saying, "They are servants of God Most High and they're telling you the way to be saved". I had to hurry on, but the words seemed to stick in my head. In a way they seemed to bring together a lot of

what I'd been thinking about. That day I was busy, but every so often these words would come back to me.

I'd almost forgotten about it all, though, when a few days later two Jewish men were brought in. They'd been sentenced to a beating by the magistrates. The lictors had beaten them, and now they were to spend the night in the jail. They looked strangely familiar. I was sure I had seen one of them before, and when I asked the officers who brought them in what they'd done, it all became clear.

They were two of the men whom the fortune-teller had been following. Seemingly she had followed them for days, always saying the same thing. Eventually one of them had turned round and commanded the fortune-telling spirit to come out of her. The man who told me said he had done it in the name of some foreign god.

Anyway, from that moment the fortune-telling ability had left the girl. She stopped her demented behaviour and was as ordinary as you or I. Some time later I got to know her, and I heard her story. She said that that day she'd been set free. That's not how her owners viewed it, though. They realised their nice little earner was gone. Now *they* became demented and they grabbed the man who'd "damaged their property" and one of his friends and dragged them before the magistrates in the Agora.

They were accused of being troublemakers, and of teaching customs contrary to Roman law. When the citizens heard this, they were enraged and demanded action. As the men were judged to be Jews and not Roman citizens, summary justice was dispensed. They were stripped and beaten there and then without further ado. When they came to the prison they were a sorry sight and in great pain, but my orders were to hold them securely, so I put them into the most secure and darkest cell and restrained their legs with fetters. At the time I thought I was just doing my duty as a good Roman out of respect for Roman law.

Anyway it was getting late and I'd had a hard day, so I ensured everything was locked up securely and I settled down for the night. About midnight I was woken by singing coming from the inner cell. I was about to jump up and go down there and read the riot act, but there was something eerie, something beautiful about it, and I just lay there listening. It seemed all the other prisoners were listening quietly too, so there was no need for me to intervene and I was tired. I couldn't understand how these men who had been beaten and chained were singing songs of praise! Because, although I couldn't make out all they were saying, that is what they were doing – they were definitely singing songs of praise to their God. I began to feel very drowsy

again, but just before I fell asleep again, I heard them singing something about being saved from death.

The next thing I knew I was in the middle of a battle fighting for my life. I was being forced nearer and nearer to the edge of a cliff. As I got to the edge I found myself crying out “Come over and help us!” and then the man I had seen in my dream appeared beside me and he was reaching out his hand to me, and I realised then he was the same man who had been followed by the girl and who was now in my prison, but I was fighting for my life, and the ground suddenly gave way under me, and I couldn’t grasp his hand, and I was falling, falling.

Suddenly I hit the floor with a tremendous thump, and I was wide awake in one terrifying, splintering moment. The floor under me was still shaking. It was an earthquake. I lay there dazed not knowing where I was or who I was.

Suddenly reality came flooding back. I sprang to my feet and ran to the entrance. It was a clear moonlit night and I could see at once that the heavy doors were wrenched wide open. There was a deathly silence. Nothing was moving in the inner darkness. My numbed brain at last grasped what had happened. The prisoners had escaped!

This was a catastrophe. As the prison officer in charge I was personally responsible for the safekeeping

of the prisoners. The penalty for failure was clear. I faced ignominious execution. There was only one honourable alternative. I drew my sword. As I looked along its pale blade gleaming in the moonlight, I thought of my wife and children. Who would protect them and work for them now? I thought of my unsolved quest to understand what, if anything, lay beyond this life. What if the more fearful tales were true? What if I was not adjudged worthy of the Islands of the Blessed? What if I was condemned to the house of vengeance and punishment instead? Was there no other way?

I knew my duty. I raised my sword.

But just as I did so, a voice came from the inner darkness, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" For a moment I was dumbfounded and terror-stricken. Was it the voice of a god? I trembled violently. Then I recognised the voice. It was the voice of one of the men in the inner cell! I called for lights from the other guards who had appeared by this time and I rushed in. The two men were standing quietly there, their fetters broken on the ground. I fell at their feet and eventually managed to say, "Who are you? Why have you not escaped? And why are you concerned about me?"

They said their names were Paul and Silas, and the one who was Paul, whose voice I had heard, said, "We are in truth what the poor slave girl said. We are indeed

servants of the Most High God telling people the way of salvation. And," he smiled, "We did not want to see a man kill himself needlessly, even if he had bound us in cruel fetters."

I brought them out of that stinking inner cell and I led them towards my own quarters. In front of the great main doors which the other guards were now hastily closing. I stopped. And out of me burst the question I had been wanting to ask all my life, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

I suddenly felt foolish and thought they might have asked me what I meant. But without hesitation they said almost in unison, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your family."

Their mention of my family moved me deeply. I didn't properly understand all they meant, but it was as if a great light started to shine in my head, as if I awoke from a deep sleep, as if I came alive for the first time in my life, as if chains that had bound me were broken. I wanted to know more.

And they lost no time in telling me and my family everything I wanted to know. They told us that we had all rebelled against God Most High who had created us and the whole world. We were under a sentence of death and darkness and separation from God. But God sent his own Son, Jesus, to take our sentence by being crucified, and if we trusted in Jesus we were put right

with God, forgiven and adopted as his children. We had no need to fear death as God promised to take us through death to be with himself forever.

I felt this was what I had been waiting to hear all my life, and I felt so ashamed of the way Paul and Silas had been treated by my fellow citizens and myself, that there and then I bathed their wounds. Then Paul asked us if we believed in Jesus as our Lord, and when we said we did, he took some of the water I had brought and poured it over our heads and said, "I baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." I felt as if I had been washed clean. We then all sat down to a meal together and it was the happiest meal we ever had.

The next morning the magistrates sent the Lictors round with orders that Paul and Silas were to be released. I was happy to inform them they were free to go. That's when Paul dropped the bombshell. He said, "They gave us a public beating without a trial and threw us into prison, even although we are Roman citizens! Now they think they'll get rid of us quietly. No! Let them come themselves to release us."

Roman citizens! You could have knocked me down with the proverbial feather! Paul told me he was a Roman citizen from the important city of Tarsus in Cilicia. They had never said anything about this to me. Maybe that was so that I wouldn't be influenced by this

when I heard their message. But you have to admire Paul's bottle. Anyone else would have been glad to have got out of prison and then argued about it afterwards. But he thought his Roman citizenship was so important that he wanted these magistrates to come and eat humble pie, before he would go. He went up even higher in my estimation after that. I later realised that he had also done it for those of us who had believed in Jesus. The authorities were going to be less likely to harass us knowing what they had done to Roman citizens. Actually the magistrates were guilty of a serious crime and if Paul had wanted to, he could have had them all arrested.

I will never forget the looks on the faces of the magistrates, usually so proud and haughty, when they came to the prison and pleaded with Paul and Silas not to be offended, that it was all a mistake, but also asked that they leave the city quietly. Paul made it very clear that he could have taken further action, but he said because the Lord Jesus had called him to a work of peace and love, he would let the matter rest, but he did not want to hear of any similar problems in Philippi again. The magistrates were very apologetic, and gave assurances it would not happen again.

After that Paul and Silas left and told me they would be meeting up at the house of a lady called Lydia, who was a business woman in the city, and

asked me to come and meet up with the other believers in Jesus.

Later that day I went with some trepidation to the grand house of Lydia, who it turned out was rather wealthy. She was a dealer in purple cloth from Thyatira in the Province of Asia. As I met up with those others who had become followers of Jesus, it was fascinating to hear their different stories. Lydia had come to believe very quietly and simply in a meeting of Jewish women who met by the river to pray. Paul and Silas came to speak to them and she felt her heart was opened to hear and understand what they were saying about Jesus.

Even more amazing was the story of Pythia, the fortune-telling slave girl. As she was now worthless to her owners, Lydia had redeemed her and set her free, and she now worked for Lydia. She was almost childlike – learning everything as if new. Her life had been dominated by fears and terrors, both human and supernatural. “But now”, she said, “my chains have been broken. I am free.”

And that’s it in a nutshell. Lydia, Pythia and myself – our chains have been broken. We have been set free.