

Back in January, we talked about what it means to be imprisoned. We talked about it for our vision and planning, how our first thoughts were instantly about incarceration. But as we talked, our understanding of imprisonment grew. We thought of different ways that we can be imprisoned: whether it's incarcerated, whether it's within our own health, whether it's in our mind. We came up with a number of different ways that we could do that, but today's reading covers a lot of that too.

Lucas, telling us the story of Paul. We talked about it last week with the conversion. We're continuing to hear about the story of Paul and what he went through and what he saw and how he touched and affected people. And in today's story, it's talking about, we're talking about how we can help those who are in prison.

The story starts off very vague. We hear about a woman, a woman with a talent to tell the future. And she's using this talent to make money for her owners because she's a slave. Remember that being a slave, then, is not necessarily the way that we learn about being slaves with the Civil War. It's more of just an indentured servitude. She's working to pay off a debt, but she's still property if she's still imprisoned with them. But not only that, as we find out she's imprisoned within as well, cuz this isn't a gift that she has. It's a demon inside of her. It's something with inside of her that she cannot control herself. It's something. That's there because of something else that happened in life that she had no control over. The demon is one of the legion.

If you remember way back when we talked about Luke 8, years and years ago now. Jesus came upon a man who was imprisoned. He put himself in shackles in a cave because of the demons that were inside of him. When Jesus talked to him, the demon said that his name was Legion, and there were multiple, multiple demons within him. So much so that Jesus kicked him out, and they went into a number of hogs. And then they ran down into the water and drowned. This is one of those demons.

But instead of doing all the evil things that it had done previously, it's hiding within her, trying to do good, or at least good enough so that she's not seen. So it's not seen.

I see a lot of puzzled faces. How can a demon be inside somebody and do good? Because aren't they all supposed to be bad? But isn't that like it in some of the things that we do? We think we're doing well. We think that we're helping somebody, and really, we just continue to make matters worse. We think we're helping. We think we're doing the right thing.

I have a friend. For years I did not know what she was going through. She was late to work all the time. She always wore long sleeves, always wore pants, even when it's 100 degrees out, and I never knew that she was being beaten at home. I never knew the second life she had to live. And I didn't know that I made it worse. I would try to help her. Her car would be broken down, and she'd have to walk five miles to get home. I didn't know that her car wasn't broken down. I didn't know that her husband took the keys from her car because he was mad at her.

He'd beaten her the night before to a point that she couldn't do anything, And she couldn't say she was wrong. So he took the keys until she told him that she was wrong, but I gave her a ride home. She didn't learn her lessons the day before, so he beat her again. This time, she ended up in the hospital, not because she called for it, but because somebody happened to be walking by their house and heard it.

I found out later that every time I was nice to her, she got beat. Every time I helped her, she got beat. I gave her more hours because she told me she couldn't afford something, so I gave her more hours since you can make more money. I didn't know that she was given an allowance, and when she made more money than that allowance, she got beat. I thought I was doing something good, but what I was doing was just imprisoning her more in that situation. We don't know always when doing good is also doing bad.

In this case, Paul just got tired of it. Paul got tired of hearing how great things were, because isn't that one of those things when you're trying to help somebody who's imprisoned? They tell you that everything's fine. They tell you, they're okay. They tell you, there's nothing wrong.

Paul eventually got to the point. I don't believe it anymore, and he pulled that demon out of her. He separated her from the evil inside of her, but then what happened to her? We don't know. Nowhere else in the Bible does it talk about what happens to her next? Did her owners forget the rest of the debt? Did the owners force her into prostitution?

I know those are two big extremes, but we don't know. We don't always know if we're doing the right thing. We keep going in the story. The owners are mad because they just lost out on a lot of money because of the good The Paul did. So, what do they do? Do they say hey, give me money? Pay for this? You hurt us. No, they go instead and tell everybody that Paul is a Jew. And then he needs to be beaten. You need to be thrown in jail because his beliefs are different than theirs and without any doubt without a question of whether this is right or wrong, the group comes together, and they beat him. They strip him naked. They beat him and Silas, and they throw them in jail. There's no trial. There's no question of right or wrong. There's no explanation for why they're doing this to them, other than they're Jews.

Not only are they Jews, they're Jews that follow the way. That makes them worse. And all Paul and Silas are doing is trying to help the world. Tried to make it a better place. They're doing what they can to help others. How they're making it harder. They're in prison, they're sitting there. They are praying; they are singing. They are talking to God, asking for direction, asking for hope, asking for wisdom. And an earthquake happens. The doors open and the shackles fall. They can all leave, but they don't. They recognize that even though they are incarcerated, they are imprisoned, it is only an Earthly imprisonment because, in their hearts, in their souls, in their minds, they are beyond those four walls. They are worshiping God, and they are going to continue to worship God. They're going to continue sharing that love, and that wisdom, even though they are imprisoned.

After the earthquake, The jailer wakes up because these guys have been beaten to it out to an inch within their death, they're not going to escape. And everybody else in there. They're not going to escape, so he can take a nap. I'd love to have a job. I can just randomly take a nap. Would that be nice. But he wakes up because he hears the commotion. He hears the gates opening. He hears the shackles breaking, and his first thought is to kill himself because he knows that if one of those people escapes, and yes, I said those people, but these are good those people. If one of them escapes, he knows he'll be put to death. And if he's lucky, they'll just kill him on the spot.

But he's Roman. It's a Roman prison. He's not going to get that luxury. He is imprisoned by his culture. They're going to drag him out. They're going to strip them down. They're going to beat him, and they're going to crucify him. They're going to put him on a cross in front of

everybody to show that if you don't do your job well, you will die. He knows it. And just before he throws himself on his sword, Paul yells to him again, trying to do the right thing and save this man. He tells him that they're all there. They're all still inside because God's love is more than they can do, than the Romans can do to them. God's love is greater than the imprisonment that they're being forced to endure here on Earth. And the jailer believes it. Believes him so much that he is willing to convert his entire family to bring them all together to feel God's love.

This part of the scripture is often used in defending infant baptism. If there's once your family is a part of God's love, you are automatically a part of God's love. You are already part of something greater that you don't know about, and all of these Earthly imprisonments don't matter. They don't matter. Jesus died for us so that we can live, so that we can live outside of the pain and suffering that we have to endure on a daily basis here. That love is greater than the imprisonments we put upon ourselves, thinking that we are worse than what we are. Letting people decide who we are for us. These are all ways that God helps us. God sets all of that aside, because none of that is important. What's important is God's love coming through us, knowing the sacrifice that Jesus made so that we can live knowing that each and every day is a gift that God has given to us. Knowing that we are not meant to be entombed. Knowing that the stone has been rolled back in our lives, that we can walk out. We can throw down all of the wraps that are meant to tie us down, and set them aside, just as Jesus did.

Just a few weeks ago, have you all still been going out and saying Hallelujah to everybody? I did it the other day. There's somebody who knew that I was going to do it. They said it back, but then somebody who didn't know overheard us and said, does your church celebrate Easter differently than the rest of the world? And I said, yes, we celebrated every day. We celebrate it because we can. We celebrate it because we have stopped being imprisoned. We do it because we know how great God's love is.

Let us pray.