

EMPOWERED for the Midnight Hour

Acts 16:16-34

INTRODUCTION

Every one of us has experienced what I call a *midnight hour*.

I'm not talking about a particular time on the clock. I'm talking about those seasons in life when everything suddenly becomes dark. The doctor's report comes back differently than you hoped. The relationship falls apart. Someone you love dies. A job disappears. Or perhaps nothing dramatic has happened at all—you simply lie awake in the middle of the night wondering what tomorrow is going to bring.

Those are our midnight hours. Moments when life no longer makes sense and we quietly ask, "*God, where are you?*"

As we've been working our way through the book of Acts this summer, we've seen the Holy Spirit empowering the church in remarkable ways. People have been healed. Thousands have come to faith. The Gospel has spread beyond Jerusalem. Time after time we've seen God opening doors that no one thought possible.

Then we arrive at Acts 16, and the story takes an unexpected turn.

Paul and Silas have been faithfully following God's leading. They traveled to Macedonia because the Spirit directed them there. They've preached the Gospel. They've served people. They've even delivered a young woman from spiritual oppression.

If anyone deserved to see God continue blessing their ministry, surely it was these two.

Instead, they are falsely accused, beaten with rods, stripped publicly, thrown into prison, and locked in the innermost cell with their feet fastened in stocks.

If you've ever wondered why difficult things happen to faithful people, you're not alone. Paul and Silas could have asked that same question.

This morning's passage isn't really about an earthquake. It isn't primarily about prison. It's about what an empowered follower of Jesus does when life enters its darkest moments.

Because sooner or later, every one of us experiences a midnight hour.

Movement One: Midnight Doesn't Mean God Has Left

One of the greatest misconceptions many Christians carry is the idea that if we're faithfully following God, life should naturally become easier.

We may never actually say those words out loud, but we often live as though they're true. We assume that obedience should lead to blessing, that faithfulness should lead to comfort, and that if we are where God wants us to be, then surely He will smooth the road ahead.

Then something happens that doesn't fit our expectations. A diagnosis changes everything. A marriage begins to unravel. A child walks away from the faith. The company downsizes. Retirement doesn't look the way we imagined. We pray, and nothing seems to change.

It's in those moments that we begin asking questions we never thought we'd ask. *"Lord, did I miss Your will?" "Did I do something wrong?" "Have You forgotten about me?"* Paul and Silas could have asked every one of those same questions.

Remember how they arrived in Philippi. They weren't there because they had chosen the destination themselves. Acts tells us that the Holy Spirit redirected their journey. Paul had the vision of the man from Macedonia saying, *"Come over and help us."* They understood that as God's call, and they obeyed it. Everything about their journey pointed to God's leading.

Once they arrived, they met Lydia by the river. She became the first convert in Europe, opened her home to them, and the church in Philippi was born. It must have seemed as though everything was unfolding exactly as God intended.

Then they encountered a young woman who had been exploited for years. She was possessed by a spirit that allowed her owners to profit from her fortune-telling. Paul, moved by compassion and empowered by the Holy Spirit, set her free.

Think about that for a moment. Paul liberated a woman from spiritual bondage and restored dignity to someone who had been treated like property. He did exactly what Jesus would have done. And for that...

he was beaten. Not thanked. Not celebrated. Not honored. Beaten. Dragged before the authorities. Publicly humiliated. Thrown into prison.

When we read the story from beginning to end, we already know there's an earthquake coming. We know there's a miracle waiting just a few verses away. Paul and Silas didn't know that. All they knew was that they had obeyed God, and obedience had landed them in the deepest, darkest part of a prison.

I think that's important for us to remember because we have the advantage of hindsight. We can flip a page and see how the story ends.

They couldn't. They had to live the story before they understood it. And isn't that where most of us live? Very few of us know what God is doing while we're in the middle of the story.

We understand His faithfulness looking backward much more easily than we recognize it looking forward.

That's why midnight can be such a difficult place. Midnight is the hour when we can't yet see the sunrise. Midnight is the place where our prayers seem unanswered. Midnight is where we're tempted to believe that because we cannot see God at work, He must not be working at all.

But throughout Scripture, God has always been working in the darkness. Joseph spent years in an Egyptian prison before becoming the one who would save his family. Daniel spent a night in the lions' den before God closed the lions' mouths. Jesus Himself spent three days in the darkness of the tomb before resurrection morning.

Again and again, God reminds His people that darkness is never the end of the story.

So before we move on, let me ask you to name your own midnight hour quietly before the Lord. What is the place where you are most tempted to believe that darkness has the final word?

Maybe that's a word someone here needs to hear this morning. Perhaps your midnight is a health concern. Perhaps it's grief that still catches you by surprise. Perhaps it's uncertainty about your future, or your family, or finances, or simply wondering what comes next in this season of life.

Or perhaps, as a congregation, we sometimes wonder what God's future looks like for St. John's. We've been doing everything we can to be faithful to God, to His Word, to love and serve our community, and yet we find ourselves in our present circumstances.

Acts 16 reminds us that difficult circumstances are not evidence of God's absence. The prison was never outside of God's reach. In fact, it was exactly where God was preparing His next work.

Our midnight does not mean God has left us. It may mean we are standing in the part of the story where we cannot yet see what He is doing. But Acts 16 calls us to believe that the same God who led Paul and Silas into Philippi was still with them in the prison, and the same God who has led us this far has not abandoned us now.

If that is true, then the question is not whether we will ever experience midnight. The question is: when the darkness comes, how do Spirit-filled followers of Jesus live while they are waiting for morning?

Movement Two: Worship Is an Act of Trust

At the heart of this story is one verse that has inspired Christians for nearly two thousand years. Luke tells us, *"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them."*

It's easy to read that verse and move on because we already know the story. We know an earthquake is coming. We know the chains are about to fall off. We know the jailer is about to give his life to Christ. But Paul and Silas knew none of that.

As far as they knew, this prison cell might be where they would spend the rest of their lives. Their backs still bore the wounds from the beating they had received earlier that day. Their feet were still locked in wooden stocks. The prison doors were still securely shut. There was no visible evidence that God was about to intervene.

And yet, in the middle of all of that, they prayed and they sang. I think it's important to notice that Luke says they were **praying** before he says they were **singing**. Their worship wasn't an attempt to ignore reality or pretend everything was fine. Prayer has always been the place where God's people bring Him their fears, their disappointments, and even their questions.

If you've ever read the Psalms, you know that many of them begin with honest cries of pain. "How long, O Lord?" "Why have You forsaken me?" "Where are You?" God has never asked His people to deny their emotions. He invites us to bring every one of them into His presence.

But prayer wasn't the end of their response. After pouring out their hearts to God, they began to sing. That wasn't because prison had suddenly become pleasant. It wasn't because the pain had disappeared or because they had somehow convinced themselves everything was going to work out. They sang because

there is a profound difference between trusting God **because** our circumstances are good and trusting God **because God is good**.

That's what worship really is. Worship is not pretending life is easy. Worship is declaring that God is still worthy when life is hard.

Every Sunday when we gather in this sanctuary, we don't all come carrying the same burdens. Some of us have had wonderful weeks. Others have spent the week sitting beside hospital beds, grieving the loss of loved ones, worrying about family members, or wondering how we're going to face another difficult day.

Yet we stand together and sing. Not because every problem has been solved. Not because every prayer has already been answered. We sing because our hope has never rested in our circumstances. Our hope rests in the God who has promised never to leave us or forsake us.

Then Luke adds one small detail that would be easy to overlook. He says, "*The other prisoners were listening to them.*" I don't think that's simply an interesting observation. I think it's one of the most important lines in the entire story.

Those prisoners had undoubtedly heard anger. They had heard cursing, despair, and hopelessness echo through those prison walls countless times before. But now they were hearing something entirely different. They were hearing two men whose faith was stronger than their chains.

Without even realizing it, Paul and Silas had become missionaries in a prison. The same thing happens in our lives more often than we realize.

People are always listening. They watch how we respond when life goes well, but they pay even closer attention when life falls apart. Our neighbors, our families, our friends, and our coworkers all notice whether our faith disappears when the midnight hour comes or whether it remains steady because it is rooted in something deeper than our circumstances. Our worship may be the very thing God uses to open someone else's heart.

Transition : Paul and Silas thought they were simply spending another painful night in prison. They had no idea that God was about to use their faithfulness to change an entire household forever.

Movement Three

God Often Uses Our Midnight for Someone Else's Miracle

As we continue reading the story, Luke tells us that suddenly there was a violent earthquake. The foundations of the prison were shaken, every door flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. It's an incredible miracle, but I don't think the earthquake is actually the focus of the story. Earthquakes are impressive, but Luke quickly moves our attention away from the prison itself and onto one man—the jailer.

To understand why this moment is so significant, we need to understand what this jailer believed had just happened. Under Roman law, if prisoners escaped, the jailer could be executed in their place. As far as he knew, his life was over. That's why he drew his sword. He wasn't simply acting out of fear; he believed there was no future left for him.

Before he could carry out that desperate act, Paul cried out, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here." I've always found that remarkable.

Paul had every reason to leave. He had been beaten without a fair trial. He had been humiliated in public. He had spent the night in pain because of the actions of these authorities. If anyone could have justified walking out that prison door without looking back, it was Paul.

Instead, he stayed because he understood something that is easy for us to forget. Freedom wasn't the greatest miracle God wanted to accomplish that night. God wasn't simply interested in opening prison doors. He was interested in opening a human heart. That changes the entire way we read this story.

The miracle was never just about Paul and Silas getting out of prison. It was about God using their faithfulness in the middle of suffering to prepare someone else to encounter Jesus Christ. Think about everything the jailer had witnessed over the course of that night.

He had seen two men arrive after being beaten nearly to the point of collapse. Instead of hearing bitterness or anger echo through the prison, he heard them praying. Instead of curses, he heard hymns of praise. When every opportunity to escape finally arrived, he watched them remain behind so that another man's life could be spared.

By the time he fell at their feet and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" that question had not been created by the earthquake alone. The earthquake shook the prison, but their worship, their mercy, and their refusal to abandon him had already begun shaking his soul. He realized these men possessed something he had never found for himself.

Paul's answer is beautifully simple. "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."

The Gospel has always been wonderfully uncomplicated. Salvation is not earned through good works or religious performance. It is received by placing our faith in Jesus Christ, the One who died for our sins and rose again so that we might have new life.

The story then ends in one of the most beautiful reversals in all of Scripture. The jailer who had locked their feet in stocks now washes the wounds on their backs. The man who had guarded them as prisoners receives baptism alongside his family. They sit together around a table, no longer divided by fear or violence, but united as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Only God can transform a prison into a place of worship, a jailer into a disciple, and a midnight of despair into the beginning of a new life.

I think there's an important lesson here for us. Very often, while we're living through our own midnight hours, we assume God is working only on us. We pray for Him to remove the hardship, fix the situation, or answer the question that's weighing on our hearts.

Sometimes He does. But sometimes God is accomplishing something much larger than we can see.

Sometimes He is preparing us to encourage another person who will one day walk through the same valley. Sometimes He is giving us a testimony that will point someone else to Christ. Sometimes the faithfulness

we display in difficult seasons becomes the very evidence another person needs before they are willing to trust God themselves.

As we've been asking throughout this entire *Empowered* series, "What does the Holy Spirit empower believers to do?" this passage gives us another answer. The Spirit empowers us to trust God when we cannot trace His hand, to worship when circumstances give us no easy reason to sing, and to become witnesses even in the places we would never have chosen for ourselves.

Perhaps that's the invitation for us this morning. Instead of asking only, "Lord, when will this midnight end?" maybe we should also be asking, "Lord, who are You preparing me to love? Who needs to see Your faithfulness through my life? How might You use this season to bring someone else to Jesus?"

We may never choose our midnight hour. None of us would. But if this passage teaches us anything, it is that God has a remarkable way of redeeming even our darkest nights for His glory and for the salvation of others.

Transition to Communion

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, we're reminded that Jesus Himself walked through the darkest midnight the world has ever known. He was betrayed, abandoned, arrested, and crucified. Yet God transformed what looked like humanity's greatest defeat into the greatest victory the world has ever seen.

The same Christ who met Paul and Silas in their prison now meets us at His table. He reminds us that He has not abandoned us, that He walks with us through every midnight, and that because of His resurrection, darkness never has the final word.

As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table this morning, I want you to notice that the story does not end with an earthquake, open prison doors, or even the jailer asking, "What must I do to be saved?" The story ends around a table.

It doesn't end with an earthquake. It doesn't end with prison doors standing open. It doesn't even end with the jailer asking, "What must I do to be saved?" The story ends around a table.

The jailer, who only hours before had been part of their suffering, now sits with Paul and Silas as a brother in Christ. The wounds have been washed. Grace has been received. A household has been transformed. What began in darkness now ends in fellowship. I don't think that's an accident.

Throughout Scripture, God so often brings His people to the table. At the table, enemies become family. At the table, grace is received. At the table, we remember who God is and what He has done for us. And today, we come to this table carrying our own midnight hours.

We come carrying our own midnight hours. Some of us bring grief. Some bring uncertainty. Some bring broken relationships. Some bring questions that have no easy answers. Some simply come weary from carrying burdens that no one else knows about.

Yet we come because this table reminds us that our circumstances never have the final word.

When Jesus gathered with His disciples on the night before the cross, it certainly looked like midnight. Betrayal was already in motion. The cross was only hours away. The disciples didn't understand what was happening, and before the night was over every one of them would fail Him in one way or another. And yet Jesus welcomed them to His table.

The cross itself looked like the darkest midnight the world had ever known. It appeared that evil had won, that hope had been extinguished, and that death had spoken the final word. But Easter morning proved what God has always been showing His people. Midnight is never the end of the story.

Because Christ lives, we know that darkness never has the final word. Sin never has the final word. Death never has the final word. God's grace always has the final word.

That is why we come to this table today—not because we have earned a place here, but because Christ has invited us.

And whenever we come into the presence of such amazing grace, there is only one honest response. We come with humble and repentant hearts, not trusting in our own goodness, but resting in the mercy of Jesus Christ. So I invite you now to join me in our prayer of confession.

"Lord, I confess I have sinned against You and my brothers and sisters, in my words, my deeds, and in failing to act. Forgive me for my sin, and according to Your Word, cleanse me from all unrighteousness."

(Prayer of Confession)

Having made confession of our sins, and receiving His grace, let us now boldly proclaim our faith together.

The Apostles' Creed: I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth...

Invitation to the Table

Words of Institution

Partaking of Communion