

Breaking Chains (Acts 16:16-40)

God breaks the chains of Paul and Silas thrown in jail for proclaiming the gospel. However, in this story other 'chains' are being broken. The chains based on making the wrong things important in our lives: money grabbing, people pleasing and success.

What are the chains that control your life?

Later on we are going to hear a story of Paul and Silas being in jail and chained up. Then God sends an earthquake, their chains are broken and they are set free.

Most of us will never be chained up or handcuffed or put in prison. But sometimes we can talk of invisible chains that control our life and stop us becoming the kind of people God has made us to be.

I want us to think about three of these kinds of chain this morning.

Money Grabbing Chain

Firstly, there is the money grabbing chain.

If you are someone that thinks that having more money is really important in life, then this may be a chain that is holding you down.

Of course we all need to have some money and we need to be sensible about how we use our money, but for many people a desire to have lots more money is something that controls their life. This may be true of people that already have lots of money or those who have very little. When you think that having more money is the one thing that will make you happy or solve all your problems, then it has become a chain for you.

Jesus and the Bible constantly warn us about the dangers of being greedy or wanting to have more and more money. It says that this desire for money, will stop us loving God and stop us living the way he has made us to live.

For example in 1 Timothy it says:

" For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." (1 Tim. 6:10)

➤ **A chain because it leads to the fear of losing money**

And when we love money, when we think that the best thing we can do is have more of it, then we will have a fear of losing the money we already have. This fear can act like a chain on our life, stopping us being good and generous as God calls us to be.

People Pleasing Chain

Secondly, there is the people pleasing chain.

If you are someone that thinks that it is important to have everyone like you no matter what, then this also can act as a chain on your life.

Of course we shouldn't want to upset people unnecessarily and we should try and be friends with people, but if pleasing people is the most important thing, you may end up doing things you know are wrong, because others are doing those things and you want to please them by joining in. You may end up failing to do what is right, because you are worried it might upset people.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus said that one of the seeds that did not grow and bear fruit, was like people who were excited about being a Christian to start with, but gave up being a Christian, because it made other people not like them.

➤ **A chain because it leads to the fear of being disliked, rejected, bullied**

Like the Money Grabbing chain, this chain leads to fear that controls us and stops us doing what is good and right, because we are afraid of being disliked, rejected or bullied.

Success Focused Chain

Thirdly, there is the success focussed chain.

If you are someone who wants more than anything else to be successful, to do well in your exams, be the best in your class or at your sport, then this may be a chain that ties you down.

Again, it is good to make the most of the talents God has given you, but if you desire for success is all that matters, then it may lead you to do things that you know are wrong in order to be successful. It can also make you envious of people who are more successful than you.

In James it warns us:

"For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice." (James 3:16)

➤ **A chain because it leads to the fear of failure.**

Again the success focussed chain leads to fear. In this case, fear of failure. Failing your exams, failing to win the competition, failing to get a promotion... Such fear can end up controlling your life.

Breaking the Chains:

So, we've looked at some of the chains that can control people and stop us being the kind of people God wants us to be. In the story from Acts this week, we see Paul escape from prison, his chains are literally broken by an earthquake God sends.

But actually, we also see that what is even more important in the story is a breaking free from the chains we have been talking about. So, let's think about the story and how this happens.

Paul and the Slave Girl - Breaking the Money Grabbing Chain - 16:16-19

The first part of the story involves a female slave who had an evil Spirit that enabled her to predict the future. Luke tells us that this was important because her ability to predict the future earned a lot of money for her owners as a fortune teller.

Anyhow this girl starts following Paul and his friends around shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." This kept happening day after day and although what she was saying was true, Paul probably realised that having an evil spirit point people to you was not helpful and also it was not good for this girl to have an evil Spirit.

So eventually, he turns around and says to the Spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her!" Immediately, the Spirit left her!

But so also did her ability to make money for her owners!

Paul cared more about sharing the riches of the good news of Jesus and the freedom from evil spirits of this slave girl, than the riches of her masters. Paul was free of the money grabbing chain.

For him the money did not matter as much as people being set free and being saved by Jesus. Paul was free from the money grabbing chain and in a way he had not just freed this girl from and evil spirit, but from her role in making money for others.

However, her owners did not see it as a good thing. They were money grabbers and cared more about their profits than the girl. So they became really angry with Paul and Silas!

The story shows us that we have a choice to make between serving money and God. Jesus says,

""No-one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." (Matthew 6:24)

Paul and the Magistrates - Breaking the People Pleasing Chain - 16:20-23

In setting the girl free from this slave, Paul showed that he also wasn't afraid of upsetting people by doing what was right. He wasn't chained by the people pleasing chain.

In fact it was not just this that upset people. They were also upset, because they didn't like what Paul and his friend Silas were teaching. Philippi was a Roman colony in Northern Greece. Those that lived there saw themselves as Romans, but knew that most of the people in the area around them were Greeks. As a result they were very loyal to Rome and Roman customs. Paul's message about Jesus seemed to challenge these Roman customs and so people were very upset and angry at Paul and Silas.

So, they had Paul and Silas stripped and beaten with rods and locked up in jail. The point was to scare them and bully them into not talking about Jesus anymore.

But, despite this bullying and their threats, Paul and Silas were not afraid. They were not chained by the People Pleasing Chain. Instead they praised God and sang hymns and songs to God in jail. They cared more about pleasing God, than pleasing people.

Paul and Silas had really taken to heart the teaching of Jesus about this:

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12)

Paul and the Jailer - Breaking the Success Focussed Chain - 16:24-34

But the story does not end there. The focus of the story now turns to the jailer. He is keen to follow the orders and do his job well. Taking Paul and Silas he locks them in the most secure part of the prison.

Then later that night as Paul and Silas are singing praises to God, there is an earthquake and the foundations of the prison are shaken. All the prison doors are opened and everyone's chains are loosed.

For the jailer this appears to be an utter disaster. When he saw the doors open, he assumed that all the prisoners had escaped. He thought he had utterly failed at his job and probably because he was a success focussed person, he could not bear to live with the consequences of this failure, so he decided he was going to kill himself.

But just as he draws his sword, Paul shouts out and assures him that they haven't all run away.

Then Paul and Silas are able to explain to the jailer that true salvation comes not through success, but through what Jesus has done for them and the power of God. The jailer and all his household believe and are baptised and are filled with joy. As a result!

The jailer has been set free from the success focussed chain and learnt the importance of serving Jesus. Jesus says:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

How can we break free from these chains?

So how can we be free from the money grabbing chain or the people pleasing chain or the success focussed chain.

Paul and Silas and in the end the jailer showed they were free from these chains because they put Jesus as number one in their life. In following Him we find freedom from these other chains and freedom to be the people God wants us to be and have the life God wants us to have. Paul later wrote to the church in Rome and said:

"But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life." (Romans 6:22)

When we have that freedom in Christ, like Paul and Silas praising God despite being beaten and in jail, and the jailer discovering the salvation in Christ for the first time, we can discover a new joy, one focussed not on having money or being popular or successful, but in knowing Jesus as our Lord and saviour. As Paul later writes to the church in Philippi:

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4)

Have you discovered the joy of being free from chains by trusting and following Jesus as number one in your life?