



## EXIT OR ENTRANCE?

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In the old Broadway show, the Music Man, Professor Harold Hill comes to the town of River City. He starts stirring up fear over the state of the city's youth. As he put it, "You've got trouble with a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for pool." He convinced the parents that if their kids spent too much time playing pool, they would become total delinquents, saying words like "swell". Of course, Professor Hill was a con man, not a professor, and his real motivation for getting everyone riled up was money. He wanted to sell more musical instruments, so he promised they would keep kids out of the pool hall. He was a con artist.

This morning my friends, we've got trouble, trouble, trouble. Right in front of our eyes. With a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for Philippi. Our story today has all the elements of a Broadway musical. You've got a con artist who is stirring up a town and causing problems over money. You've got action and drama. Believe it or not, there's even a song right in the middle.

Paul and his entourage have been traveling and sharing the gospel, taking it further and further from Jerusalem, just as Jesus had said would happen.. With each chapter, the circle seems to be widening. Now they've reached the town of Philippi, which is in Greece, near the border of present day Bulgaria. Luke has now joined up with Paul, and so he now starts giving the account in the first person.

### **Acts 16:16-40**

*Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.*

*When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are*

*throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."*

*The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"*

*The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*

*They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved-you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God -- he and his whole family.*

*When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace."*

*But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."*

*The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left.*

I had a lot of talented friends when I was a kid. Leroy could flip his eyelids inside out. Matt could shoot a pellet gun into his hand without crying. Kandi could bend her elbows backwards. And Kevin could do that thing where you crouch on one roller skate while you hold the other leg off the floor with your hands. As you can tell, I went to the school of cool.

As for me, my talents were right up there with theirs. One of my specialties: finding all the differences in those pictures in kids magazines at the doctor's office. I don't know what you'd call that skill, but you know the pictures I'm talking about – the ones that look the same at first, but only the very skilled eye can tell apart. I still can't resist a chance to try them when I see them. I found one in a magazine the other day, and I could sense the old magic coming back. Until Karin made fun of me and threw off my mojo.

The story we just read seems at first to be a lot like the one we read just a few weeks ago when Peter escaped from jail. There's a fight in both stories. An apostle gets thrown in prison in both of them. A miracle takes place that opens the prison doors in both of them. God gets his people out in both of them. Sounds like the same old formula.

But as you look closer, there are some major differences we can find. The focus of this story isn't about getting out of jail at all. It's not about God giving freedom. While the point of Peter's prison experience seemed to be about getting him out of there, that doesn't seem to be central with Paul – in spite of the fact that he does get out. As I read the account, I was struck by how many times Paul had opportunities to walk away, but he consistently chose something different.

There is a strong pattern here in Paul's behavior. Over and over again, instead of seeking exits he looked for entrances – opportunities to get into somebody's life and make a difference. He didn't search for a way out of his circumstances – he searched for a way into people's lives. God gave him chances to run away, but instead he stayed.

This runs against all my instincts. When I'm having a hard time, I start looking for an escape route. "Lord, please take this situation away." And as soon as a chance comes along to get away, I assume it's a gift from the Lord and make a beeline for the exit. Instead of looking for a way out of our circumstances, what if we looked for a way into growth?

But what if I didn't do that? What would happen if I turned my thoughts instead to entrances and how this difficulty might provide an inroad into new growth, either in my life or someone else's? The old saying, "Bloom where you're planted" may be right.

You can see this idea at work in Paul even before he's thrown in jail. His trouble begins as soon as he starts preaching in Philippi. Imagine what it was like to be walking around a foreign town trying to explain who this Jesus is to people who have never heard of him. That would be tough. But think how much tougher it would be with a crazy person behind you yelling, "LISTEN UP PEOPLE! THIS GUY KNOWS WHAT HE'S TALKING ABOUT!"

On paper, her words sound like they're supportive, but in real life they were completely undermining his credibility. And it's not like she just heckles him once. It goes on and on for days. And it started to get under Paul's skin. He is troubled by the constant harassment.

Now at this point, Paul has options open to him. He can leave Philippi. He's left other cities when things were bad. Jesus told his disciples if they weren't welcomed in one town, to shake the dust off their feet and move on to the next. Paul wouldn't have been criticized for packing up and hitting the road.

He also could have temporarily silenced the girl and turned her mute. There's another story where Paul made a man go blind for a while, so he could easily have solved his problem by just taking away the girl's voice so he could be heard.

Instead, Paul took a third route, turning **grief into grace**. One commentator I read said we shouldn't translate the verse as saying Paul was "annoyed" by this girl. It would be better to read that "he was grieved" by what she was doing. It was painful for him to watch her and listen to her. And it wasn't just that her behavior was obnoxious. Paul very insightfully recognized the underlying cause: this woman was plagued by a demon.

She was not just a slave to her employers – she was a slave to evil spiritual forces. John Stott describes her this way: "She had lost her identity, her individuality as a human being. If socially she belonged as a slave to her masters, psychologically she belonged to the spirit which controlled her. She was in double bondage."

Paul's response to this girl was full of grace. He could have let the interruption become an excuse for an exit: "I don't need to put up with this. I'm out of here." But he chose to go the other direction with it. He didn't let her actions dictate his response. Instead of looking for an exit, he found an entrance – an open door for changing the life of this girl. He had eyes to see what the real issue was, and then he was able to demonstrate the power of his message there in Philippi. He had been saying "Jesus saves." Now he had a living way to demonstrate it: by showing God's love to the very person causing him the most trouble. And he set her free. He gave her back her humanity and worth.

That's Paul for you. But it's sure not me. I have a hard time looking past the irritation or the hurt. Several years ago, when I was a worship leader at our old church, there was a guy who always seemed to be in my face. He didn't like the music I chose. He thought I had an agenda. He didn't like the way I led singing. He'd critique me and write complaints to the board without talking to me directly. In general, he made life difficult and in one case really attacked me on a personal level that pulled the rug out from under me.

My response was to just ignore him and dismiss him. I treated him as a non person. If he didn't have the decency to talk to me to my face, I figured I wasn't going to take his concerns seriously. We would coexist in church without communicating. I was sure I was the one in the right. Then one day, somebody filled me in on his story, and I learned how much he had been through and that he had been seriously burned by a previous church, and now he was operating out of a deep wound. It didn't excuse what he did, but it sure made it more understandable. His complaints were only directed at me because I

was the nearest target. Suddenly, his behavior began to make more sense and I saw him differently.

I was asked to work with him on a committee after that. I would have preferred an exit, but I agreed to do it. Not that I had Paul's perspective – I said yes because I needed a field credit for seminary. But as he and I worked together, my heart changed and I made a conscious decision to try and have grace for that man. I went out of my way to rebuild the relationship.. The character of our interactions did a complete flip. I gained an appreciation for him and we developed a mutual respect, because we came to understand each other. We both grew from the experience.

You probably can think of somebody like that in your own life, somebody who just grates on you or has hurt you. Maybe life keeps throwing you together and you wish you could just avoid them. Could it be that God has something he wants to do in and through you in that relationship?

Here are three simple ways Paul turned the situation around that I think we can use in similar situations.

First, he **resisted being controlled**. That girl was trying to intimidate him and shut him down, and he refused to give her that power. There are individuals in your life who have tried to gain the upper hand or have an unhealthy influence over you. Having grace for them doesn't mean letting them have their way. Sometimes our first need is to put some boundaries between us and the toxic relationships in our life.

Secondly, Paul **considered the hidden pain**. As we've said, the girl's behavior was coming from somewhere. Paul looked beyond the surface "acting out" to the cause. We will have much more grace for others when we have a good grasp on the burdens they carry.

Third, Paul **carried the girl's need to God**. He sought his intervention for her problem. Even when you don't feel like you can handle talking to someone directly, you can be praying for them, and that alone changes the dynamic of your relationship. I like how the Message version of the Bible translates Jesus' words:

#### **Luke 6:27-28**

*To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person.*

Back in World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Christian who took a stand against Hitler, and he suffered greatly for it. He was persecuted and imprisoned by the Nazis, so he knew what it was like to have real enemies. But he was still able to write these words:

*Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side and plead for him to God...we are doing vicariously for them what they cannot do for themselves.*

That is turning grief into grace. We go to God on behalf of those who are against us, those who don't like us, those who we don't like, and we ask him to pour out his mercy on them. We ask him to meet their needs. We ask him to restore their broken humanity. It's what Jesus did clear to the end on the cross, when he asked God to forgive those who put him there.

Paul took Christ into the life of that girl. And while she gained her freedom, he lost his. His problem went from bad to worse. Now instead of dealing with a minor irritation, he was looking at jail time.

Doing the right thing does not always end up feeling good. Paul and Silas were beaten and had their feet put in the stocks. Luke tells us they were thrown into the inner cell of the prison, which no doubt was dark and cold, cut off from the light of the outside world.

Here they are, bruised, tired, bleeding and stuck. I get jumpy legs when I'm tired and sit too long. I can't imagine having my feet stuck in one place in the stocks. I'd be going insane. When I'm uncomfortable or sore and tired, I want to check out. I don't want to be chatty with anybody, let alone spiritual.

Can any of you relate to Paul and Silas? Do you feel trapped, like you've been doing all the right things but are still stuck? It's time to get your praise on like Paul and Silas. God hadn't abandoned them, and he hasn't forgotten you either.

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.*

I love it that Luke tells us the other prisoners were listening. Imagine being locked away in complete darkness, feeling forgotten and alone. We've been listening to a book on CD as a family. The story is set in a prison off the coast of Ireland in the 1800s. The book does a great job of capturing how incredibly desperate life was for prisoners in that time. Terrible conditions. Horrible food and stone slabs to sleep on. Loneliness. No lights because there was no electricity. Corruption that made it hard to get justice. Harsh treatment by the guards. They were abandoned by society and left to rot.

Move that back 1800 years and I can only assume conditions would have been even worse. To be a prisoner in Philippi under Roman guard had to leave you with a sense of utter despair. And into that world drifts the sweet sound of a praise song. It was like a little bird --so foreign, so unexpected and beautiful against the harsh backdrop of the jail. There was a little glimmer of light shining in their dark world and they clung to it.

Here again, Paul would have been completely justified if he had just wanted to shut down and block out his surroundings. He could have escaped to a happy place in his mind. But instead he and Silas were **turning hurts into hope.**

Have you ever seen a singer shatter a glass with just their voice? The frequency of a note can cause the glass to vibrate so much that it can't handle it. And when Paul and Silas hit that note of praise on that gloomy midnight, it shattered the darkness for those other prisoners. Hope flooded into a place where there was nothing but misery, and it was like a Jacuzzi for their aching souls.

I don't think Paul was necessarily surprised at getting thrown into jail. It happened to a lot of the early Christians. In fact, Paul had been on the other side himself – doing the throwing. So he was prepared to suffer for his beliefs. He didn't feel abandoned at all. Like other early disciples, Paul saw mistreatment as a way of identifying with Christ. That's why he wrote these words:

### **2 Corinthians 4:8-10**

*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.*

Paul's main goal in life was not to make millions. It wasn't to follow his bliss or get the home of his dreams. Those things all depend on you taking charge of your circumstances and changing them. You have to put yourself in just the right environment. If you want to be a millionaire, they say, you have to surround yourself with millionaires. Get all your surroundings and circumstances to where they can support your goal. People can get fixated on how they're going to change their situation to reach their goals.

But all Paul wanted was for the life of Christ to shine through him. And that could happen no matter what he was going through. There was nothing you could throw at him that would be too much. He could be kicked around and beat up without losing that ability, because Jesus had gone through all that in his own life. Paul had this enormous sense of purpose when he went through hard times so he never felt panicked about getting himself out of it.

There was always some way to show the life of Christ. Paul saw it as his responsibility to think about his own struggles in terms of how God could use them to help someone else who was also struggling.

### **2 Corinthians 1:4**

*He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us.*

God doesn't comfort us to make us comfortable, although that's a nice side effect.. He hands it to us and then says, "Here. Pass this out. Spread it around." Comfort is the equipment we're given to reach into somebody else's life. Because we receive it when we're in a crisis, we don't always feel like sharing it. We have a choice to either take the comfort and run, or use it as way in to someone else's suffering.

Some of you remember our friends the Hopelys, whose two teenagers were in a terrible car accident. They were both in comas for a long time and it didn't look like they were going to be able to make it for a long time. It was a terrible crisis, and God met our friends in a powerful way through it.

Dale Hopely was a pastor in Westport at the time, working in a community that had seen really tough times, with people who had been through a lot of personal turmoil. And Dale told me that although he would never wish what happened to him on anybody, God took that crisis and used it to help the people in that town identify with the Hopelys and trust them when they said God was good.

We can let our hurt shut us down, or we can ask God to turn it into a place where hope can grow for other people.

Just when Paul and Silas think they've seen the worst, there's a strong earthquake. It must have been pretty high on the Richter scale to break open all the chains and doors. With rocks falling everywhere it must have been a terrifying experience.

But as soon as the dust settled, what a sight to see! Every door burst open. Could there be any clearer answer to prayer? That's how I would have interpreted it. This is the hand of God bustin' me loose. Could there be any other explanation?

Apparently Paul didn't buy that, because he didn't budge. He stayed right in the cell even when the way was clear to bolt. This was his big opportunity to be free! But Paul traded a **jailbreak for joy**.

*The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"*

What a dramatic moment. Now that his cell is wide open, Paul peers into the night and can make out the jailer taking in the scene, and his face looks grim. The jailer is a man of duty and honor, and as he sees those wide open gates, all he feels is failure. He can't conceive of prisoners sitting quietly in one spot when they could take off. That thought hasn't even occurred to him. His one job in life was to keep these people contained, and he blew it. What was left for him but shame and disgrace? In his world, the only way to deal with that great of a failure is to end your life.

So he pulls out his sword. It scrapes against the sheath. The weight of it is like the weight around his heart. He's about ready throw himself on the point of it when his thoughts are interrupted by Paul. "Wait! Don't! We're all here!"

To come that close to ending your own life and then to find out you would have done it for nothing, was completely unnerving, and it shook this jailer to the core. He was brought face to face with his own mortality and realized he wasn't prepared for death.

But he had heard something about his mysterious prisoners. They claimed to know something he didn't. And now he wanted to know – NEEDED to know – what it was. And right there, Paul had the chance to introduce this man and his whole family to Jesus.

*Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God -- he and his whole family.*

There was Paul, sitting in the home of the man who had less than 24 hours ago supervised his beating. There he was having his cuts washed and bandaged by the same man who had ordered him put in stocks. And what does Luke say about this jailer? “He was filled with joy.” Joy! The same man who almost committed suicide because his life was so empty is now filled up with the joy of knowing God. A whole family was changed forever – spared incredible loss and given a brand new reason to live.

Think how differently this story would have ended if Paul had already fled after the earthquake. He would have had an amazing escape, but he would have missed the bigger miracle

Sometimes running away feels like it would bring us the most joy, when in fact resisting the urge to run opens up a chance for even greater joy. I love that because when we talk about not taking the easy exit, we can think, “Well all right. I'll do this hard thing for God and be miserable. I'll suffer in silence to be a good Christian.”

No – this is a way to find truer, deeper JOY than any other way! It's not about wallowing around in pain – it's looking for a better place to go with it. God doesn't ask us to stay to be miserable: He asks us to stay to find the greater joy.

The jailer had great joy. You'd halfway expect him to be so grateful that he just let's Paul and Silas off the hook. “You guys have been so great. Here's a get out of jail free card.” Instead, after dinner it's back to the slammer for the boys.

At least until the following morning, when the official word comes down that they are free to leave.

Finally. Now this whole affair can be over and done with. It's very clear and straightforward. If you were a little uncomfortable leaving during the earthquake, this time everything's on the up and up. There's government clearance – orders in fact – to release the prisoners. Time to leave, Paul. Let's go.

Not quite. Paul isn't ready to leave just yet. There's one more issue on his mind.

*But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."*

It might sound like Paul is being petty and looking a gift horse in the mouth. But really it's one more opportunity for him, and he's **taking time for truth-telling**.

Paul could have chosen to overlook what had been done to him. Be grateful it's over and move on. But something in his heart could not let the injustice stand. If nobody said anything, what would prevent the same thing from happening to the next prisoner?

The truth needed to be told. Nobody likes confrontation. In his book, the emotionally healthy church, Pete Scazzero writes about this whole list of dysfunctional circumstances in his church. People with explosive anger. People denying conflicts. People cheating on their spouses. He said each time he heard about a new situation, he would "pray and hope for the best." But it didn't work. Truth needed to be spoken into hurting lives in order for true healing to happen.

Escaping never brings freedom if truth-telling isn't part of the mix. It's only the truth that sets us truly free, and as difficult as it can be, we need to look for the entrances, the opportunities to address sin and hurts.

Truth-telling can very easily go wrong, so let me point out four safeguards that I think we can again find in Paul.

First, it must be direct – we tell truth to the person involved. Paul said, "Let them come in person and escort me out. What they did was wrong. They need to hear what I have to say directly."

It's much easier to share our truths with anybody EXCEPT the people that need to hear it. We're all great at talking to people on either side of us. But that's a recipe for disaster. Truth-telling is meant to be direct.

It's also factual and not just about my feelings. Paul kept his words to the wrong that had been done. When our emotions drive our response, things escalate and quickly move from truth telling to further hurts.

Along those lines, truth-telling needs to be loving and not motivated by payback. I know we can't really know if Paul was feeling loving her, but elsewhere he tells his readers to speak the truth in love, so we're going to give him the benefit of the doubt. Our goal cannot be to inflict pain or suffering on the person who has hurt us. If we can't say it with love, better not to say it.

Finally, truth-telling is straightforward and not sideways. It's got to be clear – not some vague thought that the other person has to try and decipher. If it's worth saying, it's worth saying straight out. Find words that communicate honestly and specifically.

The point of truth-telling not to be judgmental and put somebody down: the point is to motivate change and restore hope.

It is hard work to go against our instincts when we're in trouble. End it quickly, our mind says. Get out while you can. But Jesus' pattern was to enter into our pain, to stay on the cross when he could have come down. It's still where we see him best.

Oswald Chambers wrote,

*How are you to grow in the knowledge of God? By remaining where you are, and by remembering that your Father knows where you are and the circumstances you are in.*

God sees you. And he won't leave you to flounder. Paul did get out of jail. But he left the exit strategy to God, choosing instead to look for entrances, secret passageways from his prison into the lives of those around him.

God has missions of justice and mercy and salvation for us right where we're at. I pray that he will give us the eyes to see people with his grace and the courage to speak into their lives from our own.