Preaching Series: Eight Factors in Life Transformation
Sermon Title: Number Two: Exercising Our Faith

Text: Acts 16:16-34 -- As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. 17 She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." 18 And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. 20 And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. 21 They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." 22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. 23 And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. 24 Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. 25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, 26 and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. 27 When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. 34 Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

Introduction: Some time ago a group of women were studying the book of **Malachi.** As they were reading chapter three, they read verse three which says: "***He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver*** (**Malachi 3:3**)." These few words intrigued the women so that they wondered what the statement meant about the character and the nature of God. One of them offered to look into the process of refining silver and get back to the group at their next Bible study. **That week she contacted a silver smith and made an appointment to meet with him and to watch him at work**. She did not mention

anything about the reason for her interest in silver beyond her curiosity about the process of refining silver. As she watched the silver smith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were the hottest so to burn away all the impurities. The woman thought about God holding us in such a way over the fire then she thought again about the verse, "He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver." She asked the silver smith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined. The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he also had to keep his eyes on the silver for the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left even a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silver smith, "***How do you know when the silver is fully refined***?" He smiled at her and answered, "***Oh, that's easy…when I see my image in it***." Now there is a lesson for all of us. Just as a silversmith heats up silver until he can see his image in it, so ***God refines us with fire that His image becomes increasingly visible in us!***

Last week. we began a new study called "***Eight Factors in Life Transformation***." It is based on the research of LifeWay Ministry reported in a study entitled "***Transformational Discipleship***." By observing the spiritual habits and attitudes of 1,000 pastors and 4,000 Protestant churchgoers in **North America,** they hoped to determine **the importance of eight attributes** that are common to convictional Christians. These include **(1)** ***Unashamed*** – which measures how open believers are when it comes to living out their faith before the unchurched as well as other believers. **(2)** ***Bible Engagement***; **(3)** ***Obeying God and Denying Self***; **(4)** ***Serving Others***; **(5)** ***Sharing Christ***; **(6)** ***Seeking God***; **(7)** ***Building Relationships***, and the topic of today's message… **(8)** ***Exercising Faith*** by trusting in God's perfect plan for your life. To make the case for this kind of faith, ***a faith that endures through even the most difficult circumstances***, I have chosen to look at **Acts 16:16-34** this morning.

These verses provide us with three conversion stories that result from the ministry of **Paul and Silas** who were joined at the time by **Luke and Timothy** in Philippi. **The first** focuses on a woman named **Lydia**, a seller of purple cloth from Thyatira who was a worshipper of God, but knew nothing of Christ. As Paul shared the Gospel with her, God opened her heart and she responded as did her entire household. The thing I want you to get out of this account is that ***once she opened her HEART to Christ, everything else followed including her family and her HOME***. This brings us to **the second** conversion story and the first of three observations regarding the suffering that Paul and Silas experienced and the impact it had upon their faith.

The REASON for their suffering (**Acts 16:16-21 -- As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. 17 She followed Paul and us, crying out, "*These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation*." 18 And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "*I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her*." And it came out that very hour. 19 But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. 20 And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "*These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. 21 They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice*"**). The second story revolves around an anonymous demonized slave girl who could predict the future**. She was exploited by her owners for whom she made a lot of money by fortune telling. This girl followed Paul around and continually shouted out, "***These men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved***!" When Paul became very disturbed over her behavior, he commanded the evil spirit to come out of her in the name of Jesus, which of course, it did in submission to Christ's authority. Although Luke doesn't tell us that she put her trust in the Lord, it certainly isn't a reach to think that she did, especially when we realize that this wasn't an uncommon response for those who had been delivered from a demon (**See Mark 5:18; Luke 8:2**). While the young slave girl was rejoicing at having been set free, her owners were not. They were angry at the sudden loss of income and wanted Paul and Silas arrested and flogged for what they had done. They dragged the men into the market place to face the authorities and then lied about what they had done. "***These men are Jews*** (*this comment was probably laced with some anti-Semitism*) ***and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans*** (*an appeal to national pride*) ***to accept or practice***." It was not illegal for Jews to proselytize and the only people in an uproar were the owners of the slave woman and any others whom they incited against Paul and Silas. So, even though they had done nothing wrong, these two faithful servants of God were granted the privilege of suffering for the sake of their Savior. One of my most prized possessions is a book called ***Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners***. It was written by **John Bunyan** the author of **A Pilgrim's Progress**. Bunyan, a man who loved the Lord but was not ordained in **the official Church of England**, was threatened with imprisonment, and ultimately spent twelve years of his life in chains. Why? Because he refused to stop preaching the Gospel. He declared that he would rather remain in prison "***till the moss grew on his eyelids***" than fail to do what God had commanded him to do. Faith and suffering seem to be the inseparable companions of those saints who stand for Christ.

The DETAILS of their suffering (**Acts 16:22-24 -- The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with**

rods. 23 And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. 24 Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks). Despite the fact that there was no serious investigation of the charges, in order to keep the peace, the authorities had Paul and Silas handed them over to be stripped and beaten. It was a severe flogging with rods that left painful wounds and one of three such beatings for the Apostle (**2 Corinthians 11:24-25 -- Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods).** After their flogging they were thrown into the inmost part of the prison, their feet fastened in stocks, which were designed so that the prisoner's legs could be forced as far apart as possible causing great discomfort and painful cramping. ***They were treated harshly and illegally*** (*Paul and Silas were Roman citizens and had the right to a fair trial*) ***and kept under close guard***.

The CONSEQUENCES of their suffering. Now we come to the ***third conversion story***. In the middle of the night, as their fellow prisoners listened from their own cells, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God. They did not curse God or anyone else for their suffering, neither did they plan for their escape, but elected to worship the Lord. And that's when God did two things…

- **God used Paul and Silas for His glory (See Acts 16:25-34)**. Suddenly the prison's foundations were shaken by a violent earthquake that caused the prison doors to fly open and everyone's chains to come loose. The jailer woke up, saw what had happened and prepared to take his own life rather than die at the hands of his superiors for allowing everyone to escape. That's when Paul called out, "**Don't harm yourself. We are all here**." Calling for the lights, the jailer rushed in trembling and fell before Paul and Silas as a sign of respect. Then, when he had brought them out of the cell, he asked, "**Sirs, what must I do to be saved**?" Their answer was as simple as it was profound. "**Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved…you and your household**." At that time, they spoke the Word of the Lord to the man and those in his home so that everyone came to trust in Christ as Savior and Lord. As evidence that the jailer was already a new creation he began to treat the two prisoners kindly washing their wounds and later providing them with a meal in his own home, all the while filled with joy! Then Paul and Silas held an impromptu baptism service as the jailer and his family gave public testimony of their new faith. God was glorified as His Kingdom expanded to include this man and his family.
- **God used Paul and Silas to bless the church**. The next morning, the jailer was given orders to release the two men (**verse 35**). It was at this point that Paul informed them that he and Silas were Roman citizens and had been mistreated by the authorities. If they were going to ask them to leave, they would have to do it face to

face. And that's exactly what happened***. In taking this approach, Paul may well have been laying the groundwork for the new believers*** (*Lydia, the servant girl, the jailer and his family*) ***to receive better treatment from the authorities as the new church began to spread the Gospel in Philippi and beyond***.

The LifeWay Transformational Discipleship Study: In their survey regarding the **eight factors they say are essential in life transformation,** the respondents scored the highest in measuring how they deal with difficulty by exercising faith. **Here's what the survey revealed**:

- **Two-thirds of convictional Christians indicated that they expressed praise and gratitude to God even in difficult circumstances**. That's very encouraging and certainly in line with the Scriptures (**See James 1:3-4**).
- **Only one in four said they sometimes doubted God's love and provision when experiencing difficulty**. If your one of the twenty-five percent, then listen to this third observation.
- **The survey shows that the longer someone has been a follower of Christ, the more they trust God with the details of their lives. In addition, those who are involved in a Bible study group or who pray for and witness to unbelievers also have higher scores when it comes to exercising faith**. Notice from these two findings that life transformation requires TIME and STUDY. There are no shortcuts to **spiritual maturity**. It requires both if you're to come to the place where you can praise and worship the Lord (*like Paul and Silas*) even in the most difficult of circumstances.

If you're looking for some takeaways from today's message, here are four for your consideration about the importance of exercising faith in the midst of trials:

- **Paul and Silas understood that SUFFERING doesn't last, but saints do**. Persevering faith in the midst of trial is evidence that you truly know and follow Christ.
- **Paul and Silas could pray and sing while in prison because they suffered for doing what was RIGHT** (**See 1 Peter 2:20; 3:14-15**). If a trial has come upon you because you have sinned against God, you're not going to feel like praying or singing (**See Psalm 32:3-4**). An appropriate response for the believer living in sin is confession and repentance! Author **Henri Nouwen** agrees and writes, "***Perhaps the main task of the minister is to prevent people from suffering for the wrong reasons***." If, however, suffering comes as the result of doing what is right, we can expect God's favor to be manifested in some way during and after.
- **Every prisoner experienced God's common grace in being set free, but only the jailer experienced His SAVING grace**. Just because God has been kind and gracious to you, doesn't mean that you are His child (**See Acts 14:16-17**).

    - Personal faith is the only means by which anyone can experience God's salvation. This includes the jailer's family. They were not saved because he believed but because they joined him in believing in Jesus.
    - This personal faith must be in Christ (*believe in the Lord Jesus*) who is God the Son (*he believed in God*). ***GIVE THE GOSPEL DURING THE THIRD SERVICE***.
- **Paul and Silas did not leave after being released from prison because their goal wasn't the avoidance of suffering but the ADVANCEMENT of the Kingdom,**. So, they chose to remain in the custody of the jailer and share Christ's gospel with him and his family.

Conclusion: The great writer and theologian **C.S. Lewis** said: ***"…once we give God permission, by surrendering our lives to Him, He will not stop that process of purifying us…no matter how painful or unpleasant it may be."*** The Bible tells us why…because it is how God makes us usable. In his book "***You Gotta Keep Dancing***," author **Tim Hansel** observes that most of the Psalms were born in difficulty. Most of the Epistles were written from prisons. Most of the greatest thoughts of the greatest thinkers of all time had to pass through the fire. ***John Bunyan*** wrote ***Pilgrim's Progress*** from jail. ***Florence Nightingale***, too ill to move from her bed, reorganized the hospitals of England. Semiparalyzed and under the constant menace of apoplexy, ***Louis Pasteur*** was tireless in his attack on disease. During the greater part of his life, ***American historian Francis Parkman*** suffered so acutely that he could not work for more than five minutes as a time. His eyesight was so wretched that he could scrawl only a few gigantic words on a manuscript, yet he contrived to write twenty magnificent volumes of history. What are we to conclude from this? ***Sometimes it seems that just before God is about to make preeminent use of a man, he puts him through the fire***. If you're going through the fire today, I would like to take this time to remind you that God may well be positioning you for the greatest ministry of your life. Don't give up. Don't stop believing.