

## NCF "Remembering who we are"

Sharon Chubbuck, August 31, 2025.

Good Morning, New Covenant Fellowship, family of God. This is Sharon Chubbuck and as always, I am so pleased and honored to share with you.

In today's teaching we are jumping ahead a bit. We've already met Saul when he approvingly watched Stehen's execution. We're going to skip the conversion of Saul, now called Paul, when he dramatically encountered the risen Christ. We are also jumping over his ministry to the Jewish community and the Apostles' decision that the Gospel message was for Gentiles too. Others will circle back to some of these events, but today, we're going to focus on the story of Paul and Silas that Joyce and Paige read for us.

Honestly, I found this teaching hard to organize, I struggled to find the right words. Still not entirely satisfied! So, I'll start by telling you exactly the point I am trying to communicate, and we can apply them to our exploration of Paul and Silas.

First let me share a couple of parables/stories. You may have heard this one before: A man was caught in a flood, stranded on the roof of his house. He prayed, "Lord, save me!" And soon a neighbor came by in a rowboat and said, "Friend, get in!" "No," he said, "The Lord is going to save me." The water rose. Later a first responder came in a motorboat and said, "Sir, get in our boat and we will take you to safety." "No," he said, "The Lord is going to save me." And the water rose. Then the National Guard hovered overhead in a helicopter and lowered a row. "Grab hold of the rope, quickly, and we will pull you to safety." "Thanks, but no," he said, "I asked the Lord to save me. I'm going to wait for Him." And the water continued to rise, and the man drowned. When he stood before the Lord in Heaven, he cried, "Lord, I asked you to save me! Why did you let me drown?" And the Lord answered, "I sent you a rowboat, a motorboat, and helicopter and you turned them all down." This man has a spiritual focus but he is disconnected from the physical realities of life.

Another story: Martin Luther reportedly spent three hours a day in prayer. When asked how he could take that much time, he said "I have so much to do today that

I'm going to need to spend three hours in prayer in order to be able to get it all done." Luther gave equal attention to both his spiritual and physical life. Some of us can stay busy doing good works, without tapping into our spiritual nurturing, our inspiration and guidance, to keep us going.

And that is the point of this teaching. I want us to remember that all people are spiritual beings who live in a spiritual world, and all people are physical beings who live in a physical world. Both realities exist at the same time.

We see hints of this from the very beginning: In the creation story in Genesis 2:7 (CEB) "Then the LORD God formed a man—humanity, male and female<sup>[a]</sup> from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, and the humans became living beings." We were created both physical and spiritual. Formed from physical dust and breathed into life by the very breath of God.

We hear it in Jesus words early in his ministry. Mark 1:15. (CEB) tells us that when he entered Galilee, Jesus announced God's good news. "Now is the time! The Kingdom of God—the spiritual, and miraculous, eternal kingdom-- is coming, it is here even now. Change your hearts and lives—your physical choices and actions-- and trust this good news!" We are both spiritual and physical, the world we live in is also both spiritual and physical.

The two parts—spiritual and physical—are intimately connected. Ron wrote about this in the Pastor's Blog this week and added important clarity...The WHO comes before the WHAT. In other words, our reasoning, our decisions about what to do and say, don't earn us a relationship with Jesus. Rather, our spiritual connection to Jesus produces fruit in us—our physical words and actions—that express the love, mercy, and justice of God's Kingdom.

Some people only see the physical. Some see both but don't think they are equally important, probably because all our senses are tuned in to the physical! The issue is to recognize both and to stay present, sensitive, open to both.

Now, with that in mind, let's look at Paul and Silas' experience in Philippi.

A bit of backstory that Joyce and Paige didn't read: Paul and Silas (and it sounds like Luke is with them) are debating where to go with their ministry. Then Paul in a vision, sees a man saying, "Come to Macedonia and help us!" Biblical Macedonia, just north of Greece, was a Gentile region that had been conquered and colonized by Rome 200 years before Jesus was born. So Paul and Silas went to the town of Philippi (Letter to the Philippians) ruled by Roman Magistrates—the legal authorities of the town.

Philippi had just a handful of Jewish people who met by the river for prayers. Some Gentile "God-fearers" joined them. Those Gentiles believed in and worshiped the God of Judaism. Paul and Silas found them by the river and preached the story of Jesus. A Gentile "God-fearer" named Lydia was there. She was a successful businesswoman who sold purple cloth—made from an expensive dye—and was wealthy enough to own her own home. When Lydia heard Paul's message of Jesus, she believed and she and her household were baptized. She persuaded Paul and Silas and the others to stay at her home. She also opened her home for the first church in Philippi—Lydia was a woman who paved the way for others. So, Paul and Silas each day go from Lydia's house to the river to preach the story of Jesus and then back to Lydia's house and the believers who worshiped there. Things were going pretty peacefully.

Let's stop—do you notice things that were overtly spiritual, things that were overtly physical, and any relationship between the two? (Take some comments from audience?) Paul and Silas were trying to decide where to go next and God sent a vision inviting them to Macedonia. They travelled there one dusty step at a time. They physically spoke the words of the Gospel, and Lydia had her own spiritual conversion and became part of God's spiritual Kingdom. She then extended hospitality to Paul and Silas, food to eat, beds to sleep in. She also welcomed the new believers to her home for worship and spiritual encouragement. Can you see these two elements and how they dance together, reinforcing each other?

Now the meat of the story in Acts 16: 16-40. Things heat up considerably. Try to imagine yourself in the scene. Paul, Silas, Luke, Lydia, the new Christians are

meeting in her home, probably like the joyful, sharing community in Jerusalem we saw at the beginning. And Paul and Silas continue to go to the river to share the Gospel. Each day, they encounter a slave girl, on the road. She had a fortune-telling spirit, and her owners were using her to make money. Exploiting her labor, trafficking her. Every time, she loudly announces “These men are servants of the Most High God.” Eventually this irritates Paul, so he casts out the spirit—essentially freeing her and destroying her masters’ exploitive source of money.

What spiritual things do we see here? Notice any difference? The fortune-telling spirit didn’t seem to come from Yahweh. In other words, the spiritual world we live in also includes spiritual elements that aren’t of God. What are the physical things you notice? Greed, exploitation, oppression. And Paul is irritated, (pretty physical response?) and he puts an end to it, calling on the greater spiritual power of God to cast out the fortune-telling spirit. Again, both are present, both interact.

This is when things heat up. When a potential loss of money occurs, conflict soon follows. The girl’s owners drag Paul and Silas to the Roman magistrates/authorities and say they are disturbing the city. Specifically, they call out their Jewishness—saying that they are promoting the customs of their Jewish culture. Paul and Silas and their companions were not true Romans or Philippians. Essentially their accusers turned them into the “other” to be feared and hated. And they worked up the crowd which joined in the condemnation. (Sounds too familiar.)

So, the magistrates strip them and beat them with rods, a form Roman form of corporal punishment. There is no due process, no trial—just accusation and violence, then chains and maximum-security cells. They are treated like “throwaway people,” with no worth. They are “disappeared.”

Try to imagine what this felt like. Their situation was pretty hopeless—they certainly didn’t have the physical strength to break out of this prison. I can imagine the conversation, in their minds if not out loud. “Didn’t the Holy Spirit specifically direct us to come here? Or did we only THINK we heard the message to come to Macedonia?”

The physical world had their backs up against a prison wall. It is important to note here, that elements of the spiritual world also abuses them. God's almighty spirit is overall, but there are spiritual powers of darkness in the world—to exploit, discriminate, abuse. Human beings individually make the choice to cooperate with the oppressive Empire—the accusers, the magistrates, the soldiers who beat them and guarded the cell. But just as in our modern world, the systems of darkness seem “to take on a life of their own.” People are swept up in the fearmongering, orders are carried out automatically, the wheels of institutions grind on with few questions asked—injustice and evil seems to perpetuate “on their own steam.” These powers are still evident—when people are cast as “the other”, when fanning the flames of fear and hatred create a self-sustaining energy that spreads. These forces are part of the complexities of empires—and just to be clear, the organized church can be the empire, America can be the empire, sadly, they both are.

So, what do Paul and Silas do? They sing and pray out loud and all the other prisoners (and guards?) listen. Probably they pray for God to rescue them. Maybe they are singing praise to build up their own faith in the invisible kingdom of God. I also think, in those songs and prayers, they are standing in solidarity against the spiritual forces empowering oppression, injustice, exploitation. Luke may have raced back to Lydia's house to gather the new believers to also pray for God's power to deliver Paul and Silas from the powers of darkness.

Then—God acts miraculously. There's a great shaking, chains falling off, prison doors swinging wide. Prisons are set free. Sounds like the actions of the Messiah, doesn't it. And a guard realizes that his life is worth nothing if he loses all these prisoners. And yet, miraculously, Paul and Silas are still there (and all the others, apparently). The guard recognizes that he has encountered something beyond the realities of the physical world, and in rapid order, he believes, he takes them to his own home, physically dresses their wounds, and with overwhelming joy, he and his household are baptized.

Do you see it? Physical chains and cells. Paul and Silas' physical choice to resist fear and despair and, instead, focus their attention on the God they have trusted

with their lives. Physically and spiritually singing, praying, with others choosing to listen. And the spiritual reality of God shows up and breaks every chain. And a man physically dresses their wounds and he and his household are joyously welcomed into the spiritual Kingdom of God.

The next morning, the authorities tell the guard to let Paul and Silas know that the conflict is over, everything is all good now, and they are free to go---but go *quietly*.

And Paul pushes back on the Roman magistrates with outrage. “We are Roman Citizens! You beat us —you threw Roman citizens into prison with no trial. And now you want us to secretly creep out of town? Absolutely not! You will have to personally escort us out!” I suspect he raised his voice!

Paul certainly realized he was taking a physical risk. But in this action, he boldly makes a decision, to physically challenge the powers-that-be. They knew he had bested them using their own Roman system. They backed down immediately and begged Paul and Silas to leave. Instead, they go back to Lydia’s house and encourage their brothers and sisters. THEN they leave.

I think Paul did the mental calculus: what would it mean to the new house church if he and Silas just slunk away—if they were “disappeared”? Would they be left with fear and uncertainty. Would the police now have the new believers come for them next? Would the new church even survive? He reasoned, weighed physical options, and made a decision to protect the new believers, and in doing so, he nurtured their spiritual growth and survival.

I hope you can recognize the physical and the spiritual and how they are all tangled up together in this story.

What does it mean for us? I entitled this message, “Remembering Who We Are.” Sometimes, when my life gets shaky, when I watch the people I love in pain and I can’t do anything to help them, when the brokenness all around me seems overwhelming, I can “forget who I am.” Many of you can identify with that. Struggles and brokenness are our constant companion, but some periods of time are more intense than others. Now feels like one of those intense times: Children suffering destruction, starvation and death, in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, and around

the world where US AID has been stopped. The earth is battered and bruised by human greed and consumption. Immigrants in our country are accosted by masked ICE agents and denied their due process. Armed national guard troops are in the streets of the capital. The fear, distrust, and anger we see in churches, among families and friends threaten the very fabric of our society.

Whew! Even talking about it is exhausting, and it's easy to lose track of who we are.

The world is full of people making choices for evil, where powers of darkness increase the evil. But the Kingdom of God that is more powerful in this world and in eternity. John 1:5 tells us that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it." Our spiritual connection to Jesus and our physical actions in the world are how we share in the light. Both matter.

And that is the point of this teaching: Remember who we are God's family. When the world is spinning out of control, may the Holy Spirit guide our physical minds, emotions, and choices to spiritually and physically follow Jesus with acts of mercy and justice. Physical and spiritual together. Everything, everywhere, all at the same time.

A few caveats are important. We need a balance between spiritual and physical. My mom was a persistent, thinking problem-solver. I have so many memories of coming to her with some crisis and hearing her say, "Well, let's take a look at this. There's sure to be another way to approach it and solve it." Her reasoning strategies to solve problems are a big part of who I am. But I'm not suggesting that this rational, strategic approach always works. We all know that is far from the truth! Putting an unbalanced emphasis on my own good works can lead to me trying to control things and even entertaining triumphal illusions that I can make everything right if I just try hard enough. A false dream. Our physical decisions and choices can produce good work in the world, but without the refreshment and inspiration of a spiritual connection to God, we can face pride and arrogance or exhaustion and disappointment.

And on the other hand...Physical reasoning and actions may be my default position, but I've lived enough decades to have seen the Holy Spirit being very

active. Healings, visions, words of prophecy, listening for God's voice, praying for supernatural manifestations of God's reality. In my 30s, a skeptical physics professor from the U of I prayed for me, "Come Holy Spirit" and I was "slain in the spirit." I can't explain it (though something like this may have happened to Paul). It's never happened since. I just know I spent 45 minutes in an altered state, intensely experiencing the presence of God.

But I would never suggest the spiritual/supernatural approach to life always works. Far too many people's earnest prayers are unanswered. And too much emphasis on the spiritual can lead to pursuing miraculous experiences rather than developing a relationship with God and with each other. We can look for demons in every bad circumstance, but that is neither accurate nor spiritually healthy. Our connection to Jesus, our experience of the Holy Spirit of Jesus among us, is both essential and a source of great joy. But if that spiritual reality doesn't shape our decisions and choices, we can lose the witness of our lives and can actually hinder others coming to faith.

There you have it: Spiritually connecting to God nourishes and strengthens us. From that well of living water, we learn to make choices and take physical actions that bring God's love, mercy, and justice a little bit more into the world. I encourage each of you---and myself---to be attuned to the spirit and engaged in doing good in the physical world. To remember who we are.

We come to communion now, an astonishing time where the spiritual and the physical are truly one. Bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus. A miracle. Pray with me, please.

Lord, bless this cup and this loaf, to be the presence of Jesus with us, real and alive right now. May we be nourished to see you more clearly with our spiritual eyes and to follow you more nearly in our physical actions.



