



# *From the Preacher's Study*

## Theological Reflections on Life and Ministry

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### The Decision from Jail

September 9, 2014

*At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. 27 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. 28 But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself!" Acts 16:26-8 NIV*



The rest of my friends crossed the road that follows the *Via Egnatia* while I remained at the traditional site of Paul and Silas' Philippian jail. It's a first-century cistern. The early church probably built their worship space, the ruins of which are called *Basilica A*, over the real location of the prison. Yet, even if this was not the precise location—it was close enough. The frescos on the walls celebrating the earth-shattering rescue of Paul and Silas witnessed to the power that breaks chains and rolls open grave stones. Witness to that reality does not depend on my ability to establish everything with historiographic or geographical precision.

Yet, if this cistern is where Paul and Silas sang the night through in Acts 16, then I stood exactly where the jailer must have stood when the cell doors reportedly flew open. I stared for a minute into that first century hole, and I asked myself once more if I believed that the ground trembled. Did the chains really come lose? Like the jailer I was again awakened. And I allowed myself to teeter with him between orthodoxy and self-murder.

That's the irreducibly stark choice. I've never toyed much with the kind of theology that lowers the stakes by suggesting that reports of God's acts are *just* valuable metaphors for deep human longings. No doubt resurrection stories have enormous symbolic power, but if they are just psychological tricks, then they don't offer much hope for the world itself. If some Intelligence is not seeing to it that life inexplicably keeps triumphing over 13 billion years of bad odds, then I can't see how religion can be anything but a miserable kind of joke. But if there is such a life-affirming intelligence, then in principle I don't have reason to doubt the historicity of something as small as a jailbreak.

The jailer called for torches, but I peered onto the cistern floor aided by the light of day. And I confess that for a moment I let the question hit rock bottom. If I had to do it all over-- if I did not have to worry one way or another about wrecking my family, shocking most of my friends, being forced out of the preaching gig, and living with an enormously fragmented sense of self—would I crawl down again on that cistern floor and cry with the Jailer, “what must I do to be saved?” Would I and my household be baptized in the creek beyond Lydia's shop a few hundred yards from here?

It's terrifying, but also indispensable that Christians really let that question arise.

After a moment I told myself, “Yes!” Since childhood I've known why the ancients everywhere built temples over springs. The Canaanites were on to something when they believed Baal's resurgent life-force was accessible. There is a lady in Chiapas who witnesses to my friends about the resurrection of her dead child. I refuse to discount all such testimonies as madness. I still hear Paul's shout from within the prison—“*don't harm yourself,*” because I, like the jailer, am not in a fatal situation. There are powers greater than those that insist on keeping others prisoner to selfish agendas. There are realities greater than our chains—realities that lead us to love and save our jailers. The mysterious Life at the heart of all things holds out a hope not just for an existential mercy but for the rectification of all the injustices I've inflicted on the world. So I do not attempt to forgive myself, but experience myself as forgiven, carrying with me the hope that even my painful regrets will be healed.