

In Prison

Acts 16:16-40

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Paul and Silas had experienced quite a tumultuous missionary journey to this point. They had begun by visiting the churches of the region and eventually returned to the churches Paul and Barnabas had planted. They met Timothy and had him join the team, but they continually met with opposition and concluded God was guiding them in a different direction...they just didn't know where.

Then Paul had a vision of a man in Macedonia calling to him to come over and help them. Once they knew what to do, they immediately set sail for Macedonia. They had favorable winds and when they arrived in Philippi, they found a woman who was open to the gospel message. Finally, they felt like they were getting somewhere! Unfortunately, that was not to last for long. Soon they would face a new challenge, but would once again see God's faithfulness, even amid great hardship.

The Slave Girl

Our text in Acts 16 picks up immediately after the conversion of Lydia on the Sabbath.

¹⁶ One day as we were going down to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit that enabled her to tell the future. She earned a lot of money for her masters by telling fortunes. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved." ¹⁸ This went on day after day until Paul got so exasperated that he turned and said to the demon within her, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And instantly it left her. (Acts 16:16-18, NLT)

Apparently, they made it a practice of returning to the place of prayer, where they had first encountered Lydia, fairly regularly. It seems that they were continuing their ministry, preaching and teaching to anyone they encountered.

One day, a young slave girl who was possessed by a demon which enabled her to tell the future came and began loudly shouting. She shouted that they were servants of the Most High God and were telling the people how to be saved. On the surface, this seems like an innocuous problem. It seems like she was helping their ministry, not hindering it. We saw the same things happen several times during Jesus' ministry. In each case, He rebuked the demons. But this raises some questions. Why would a demon do this? Wouldn't this be assisting the ministry of Christ rather than opposing it?

I think there are a couple of reasons the demon may have taken this tactic. **First, it was disruptive.** It says the young girl was shouting. This meant she was competing with Paul for the people's attention. I have often found myself dealing with competition from other things going on when trying to teach. It derails me as a speaker, and I can watch others struggling (and often failing) to ignore the disruption clamoring for their attention.

Second, it was confusing. Here was a woman everyone knew was possessed by a demon, and by her giving these men her mark of approval, she might lead others to believe they were empowered by the same spirit. They were not.

Demons are spiritual beings, fallen angels who rebelled against God, following Satan in his rebellion. Like angels, they can interact with human beings and are active in our world. Unlike angels, however, they are not seeking to serve God's purposes. On the contrary, they are attempting to derail them and circumvent them.

Strangely, demons recognize God's authority and power but refuse to submit to it. Often, when people discover I'm a pastor, they quickly tell me, "I believe in God." I think they say this in the hope that I will leave them alone on the whole religion thing, because they've got it under control. I love to respond with James 2:19.

¹⁹ You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. (James 2:19, NLT)

The demons know God and recognize Him as the all-powerful Creator of the universe. But they refuse to submit to Him. They, however, do at least have the good sense to tremble before Him, because they know He will ultimately pour out His wrath on them.

Can demons actually tell the future? I don't believe they can. Demons are intelligent beings and can make reasonable guesses and can give a reasonable facsimile of genuine prophecy. But they do not really know the future. But for someone who is looking for answers, the assured voice of a demon may be enough to convince them they are receiving genuine insight.

Luke gives us a glimpse of what this experience may have been like. The underlying Greek here tells us that she had a "python spirit." That phrase doesn't mean much to us, which is why our English Bibles don't translate it literally. The phrase was in reference to Pythian Apollo, a Greek god who fought a snake-like creature and was victorious. He was the god of divination or telling the future. One reference I read said this,

Such persons generally spoke with their mouth closed, uttering words considered beyond their own control, and so were also known as ventriloquists.¹

So, this whole thing would have been a spectacle that made people quite aware that something supernatural was happening.

Paul put up with the spectacle for several days but eventually realized he needed to act. So he turned to the girl and commanded the demon to come out. And the demon left her. We can reasonably assume that this young girl then came to believe in Christ and was yet another new convert in Europe.

¹ Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000.

Uproar

While a young woman being delivered from demonic possession seems like good news to us, the reality was she was a slave and had been making good money as a fortune-teller. Of course, she didn't benefit from this money, but her owners did. And now, their source of income had dried up. With just a few words, Paul had upset their economic standing. Something had to be done!

¹⁹ Her masters' hopes of wealth were now shattered, so they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities at the marketplace. ²⁰ "The whole city is in an uproar because of these Jews!" they shouted to the city officials.

²¹ "They are teaching customs that are illegal for us Romans to practice."

²² A mob quickly formed against Paul and Silas, and the city officials ordered them stripped and beaten with wooden rods. ²³ They were severely beaten, and then they were thrown into prison. The jailer was ordered to make sure they didn't escape. ²⁴ So the jailer put them into the inner dungeon and clamped their feet in the stocks. (Acts 16:19-24, NLT)

The men brought Paul and Silas before the rulers of the town. They wanted them charged with a crime...but they hadn't really done anything illegal. So they took a different approach. They attacked them because they were outsiders. They pointed out that these men were Jews (which is probably why only Paul and Silas got in trouble, as Timothy and Luke were both at least partially Gentiles) and were causing an uproar in the city. They claimed they were teaching customs that were against the law of Rome! Remember, this was a very Roman city, filled with many retired Roman army officers. They were very concerned with upholding the laws of Rome.

Of course, Paul and Silas had not broken any such laws. There was a law in Philippi that prohibited people from bringing in foreign religions to the community, but they had not been preaching in the city. They were out by the river beyond the city walls. And it was not illegal for Romans to practice Judaism. There certainly did not seem to be a prohibition against driving out a demon. So these men were simply looking for an excuse to attack Paul and Silas.

This is often true of the world's approach to Christianity. People have no problems with Christianity or Christians until it begins to affect their bottom line. As long as we are content to remain quietly in the corner and do not pose a threat to the status quo, people will happily tolerate us. But the moment our faith begins to impact people economically, or put restrictions on their "freedom", or become a threat to their power or position, then Christianity becomes a problem.

And that was the case here. Many other members of the city gathered and formed a mob and convinced the leaders to act. So they beat Paul and Silas and imprisoned them. The jailer put them in the innermost dungeon and strapped their feet into the stocks. They were being placed in maximum security—all because they had delivered a young slave girl from the demon that held her hostage.

In Prison

Paul and Silas had to be incredibly uncomfortable in the prison. Their backs were likely flayed open, and they were surely bruised all over. Their feet were locked in stocks, meaning they couldn't move around. And the dungeon was nothing like today's prisons. Dungeon probably brings to mind the right image. It was dank, dark, and probably vermin-infested. The conditions would have been miserable. Their response, however, was surprising.

²⁵ Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. (Acts 16:25, NLT)

In the midst of these miserable conditions, Paul and Silas chose to pray and sing hymns to God! Rather than choosing to wallow in self-pity, they chose to focus their minds (and the minds of their fellow prisoners) on Christ. They realized they had a captive audience (pun intended!) The other prisoners listened intently to what they were saying and singing. Even in their miserable conditions, they were representing Christ.

We must remember that the world is watching. They are watching to see how we respond to the hardships of life. They have heard us espouse our beliefs, and they are watching to see if we truly embrace them, or if we only pay lip service to them. Remember that no matter what you face, you can still be a witness of Christ, simply by living in faith as you walk through the trials of life.

While all this was going on, something miraculous happened.

²⁶ Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors immediately flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! ²⁷ The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. ²⁸ But Paul shouted to him, "Stop! Don't kill yourself! We are all here!"

²⁹ The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household." ³² And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. ³³ Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. ³⁴ He brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God. (Acts 16:26-34, NLT)

An earthquake shook the jail, opening all the doors and loosing all the chains. When the jailer awoke and saw all the cell doors open, he knew he was in trouble. His punishment would most likely be death, so he decided to take matters into his own hands. He drew his sword to kill himself, when suddenly Paul spoke up, "We're all still here! Please don't kill yourself!"

I think it shows God's power and miraculous abilities that the other prisoners didn't try to escape. After Paul's declaration, the jailer asked a pointed question: what must I do to be saved? Paul's answer was direct. He told him he must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and he will be saved. That's the entirety of the gospel. He didn't tell him he had to get his life right or that he needed to get baptized or become a member of a church to be saved. He didn't debate the finer points of theology, he just told him he needed Jesus. These other things are effects of salvation, but Jesus alone can save.

Can you communicate the message that clearly? We should be able to. When I was in college, a friend of mine told me the story of how he became a Christian. His girlfriend had gone to church camp and returned home and said they needed to break up because she shouldn't be dating someone who wasn't a Christian. He decided he needed to fix that and went down to the preacher's house and knocked on the door. When the preacher answered he simply said, "I need to know how to be saved!" The preacher didn't know how to respond. He couldn't communicate the gospel to him. My friend did eventually embrace Christ, but it's a reminder that we must be able to point clearly to Jesus, just as Paul did.

The jailer believed and took Paul and Silas into his home, feeding them and caring for their wounds. He woke up the rest of his household, and they also believed. And before the night was over, they were baptized. The one who had imprisoned Paul and Silas had been set free himself!

Aftermath

The next morning, things were different.

³⁵ The next morning the city officials sent the police to tell the jailer, "Let those men go!" ³⁶ So the jailer told Paul, "The city officials have said you and Silas are free to leave. Go in peace." ³⁷ But Paul replied, "They have publicly beaten us without a trial and put us in prison—and we are Roman citizens. So now they want us to leave secretly? Certainly not! Let them come themselves to release us!" ³⁸ When the police reported this, the city officials were alarmed to learn that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. ³⁹ So they came to the jail and apologized to them. Then they brought them out and begged them to leave the city. ⁴⁰ When Paul and Silas left the prison, they returned to the home of Lydia. There they met with the believers and encouraged them once more. Then they left town. (Acts 16:35-40, NLT)

The officials decided to set Paul and Silas free and sent word to the jailer. He informed his new brothers in Christ that they were free to go. But Paul wasn't going to go quietly. They had beaten and imprisoned them without a trial—and they were Roman citizens! Their citizenship was a big deal, because a Roman citizen could not be imprisoned without a trial and was not allowed to be beaten unless ordered by the emperor. This was a major breach, and for these dedicated Romans, it created a real problem.

Why didn't Paul mention this earlier? Later, when he was arrested in Jerusalem, he did, but he didn't mention it here. It's possible he didn't think about it here, but did going

forward. It's also possible that things happened so rapidly that he didn't have time to mention it. Or, it may have been a calculated procedure on Paul's part. Whatever the reason, Paul demanded they come and apologize to them and release them themselves. By doing so, Paul was helping to protect the fledgling church from further attacks, even after they were gone. The leaders would be a bit more cautious about attacking Christians. And that's what happened! These leaders humbled themselves, apologized to Paul and Silas, and set them free. But they also asked them to leave the city once and for all.

Paul and Silas reluctantly agreed but wanted to stop by and encourage the believers once more. So they went to Lydia's house to tell them the story and encourage the young believers again before they left. After that, they moved on to their next adventure.

Conclusion

So as we look at this story as a whole, we should draw some lessons from it. **First, praise is a choice...and so is complaining.** This is a challenging truth to realize—but a powerful one once we do. Paul and Silas could have chosen to have a pity party in the prison. They could have easily concluded that God was telling them to go back home. They could have done a lot of things. They had a choice. What they chose to do was pray and sing hymns of praise to God. Recognize you have a choice in every circumstance of how you respond. Practice choosing praise over pity.

Second, God is often working through our hardships in ways we can't anticipate.

Paul and Silas wouldn't have had the opportunity to reach the Philippian jailer with the gospel if they hadn't been imprisoned. God knew what He was doing. God's priorities are usually things far bigger than our comfort. God understood that the hardships Paul and Silas faced were worth it for the outcome. In the end, Paul and Silas understood that too. When hard times come, look for ways to trust God—and look for what He might be doing in others through you. God may be working on something far bigger than you.

Finally, the world is watching how we respond to everything. Paul and Silas were singing in prison. They were the only ones. This caught everyone else's attention, and they were listening intently. They wanted what Paul and Silas had. The world watches the way we walk through life. They watch how we respond to hardships, whether it's a minor setback or a major obstacle. Do we fly off the handle, do we act just like the world, or do we demonstrate peace, faith, and confidence that the world finds foreign. The way we live testifies to what we believe. We should strive to live in faith because it's better, but also because it testifies to the world that the gospel is true.

This surely wasn't what Paul and Silas had expected when they set out on their journey. It certainly wasn't the way they had envisioned their visit to Philippi going. But God had used them to plant a church there. They had seen a woman and her family come to faith, a young slave girl set free and given new life in Christ, and an entire household come to faith through the Philippian jailer. God has lots of ways to surprise us with how He works. And that alone is reason to praise Him.

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