



# PAUL AND SILAS

## ACTS 16:16-40

### **Lesson Focus**

Jesus' liberating message of good news is often met with stiff resistance. As we proclaim this message, we must understand that we might suffer for it.

### **Lesson Outcomes**

Through this lesson, students should:

1. Understand that Jesus' message of good news disrupts and unsettles those who seek to oppress and enslave others.
2. Understand that there are oppressed and enslaved people, not just spiritually, all around us.
3. Be challenged to see the oppression and enslavement around us and encouraged to take action.

### **Catching Up on the Story**

Paul and his companions have entered Macedonia at the Spirit's leading. Previously, they had been blocked from traveling elsewhere because of the Spirit. They decided to stay in Philippi, an important city in the region. While there, they met a group of believers in God who gathered regularly outside the city to pray. Paul and his companions met with them, and they soon came to faith in Jesus and were baptized. Among them was a woman named Lydia. She was a purple cloth dealer and likely a wealthy individual. After Paul baptized Lydia, she prevailed upon Paul and his companions to stay with her. Paul and his companions stayed in Philippi for some time.

### **An Exorcism: Acts 16:16-18**

Paul and his companions are still in Philippi and have established a routine. We are not told how long they have been in the city, but it has been at least one week, because they are headed out of the city to the place of prayer.

One day, while they were heading out to prayer, a slave girl began to follow Paul and his companions around. This girl was not just an ordinary slave girl, but one who, as we will learn in a few moments, is possessed by an evil spirit.

This evil spirit had allowed the girl to tell the future, making her owners a lot of money.

This girl literally had a “Python spirit.” This means that she was understood to be like the oracle at Delphi, who was inspired by the god Apollo, the Pythian deity. It was commonly believed that Apollo was embodied at Delphi in the form of a Python snake (Witherington III, 494). For some reason, this slave girl had fastened herself onto Paul and his companions, following them around for days.

While she followed the men around, she would proclaim that “these men are slaves of the Most High God.” Our normal tendency, when we see a phrase like this, is to imagine that the slave girl and the demon that possessed her were making a truthful confession about Paul and his companions. Indeed, Jews of the day would have perhaps understood this phrase similarly. There were, however, few Jews living in Philippi at the time, and so the phrase would have been heard much differently. Among the people of Philippi, the phrase “Most High” would have only indicated that these men followed a god they believed was at the top of all the gods in the pantheon (Witherington III, 495).

The girl’s cry and confession began to annoy Paul. Looking at the original text, Paul is more than annoyed. The word translated as “annoyed” carries with it a deeper sense of unease. Paul is deeply troubled by the girl and her words. He is troubled not because the confession comes from an evil source, but because her message about who they follow and what they offer is misleading. “The very word ‘salvation’ without further explanation would often connote health or healing or rescue to a pagan” (Witherington III, 495). Paul is more than capable of proclaiming the gospel on his own and in a way that will not be confused as a pagan message.

Being so deeply disturbed, Paul decides to take action. He turns to the girl and orders the spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out of her. At that moment, the demon leaves the girl. She is now free.

### **The Reaction: Acts 16:19-24**

As you can imagine, this exorcism at the hands of Paul does not sit well with the slave girl’s owners. The owners are mad that their prospects for making money have dried up. The girl is all but useless to them now. There is an important point to be made here: the good news concerning the freedom and kingdom God has brought through Jesus Christ is not always understood as good news for everyone. It is not good news for those who have benefited from the oppression and enslavement of others. It is not good news because the freedom Christ brings and longs for us to share with others always costs oppressors something, usually money. This is one of the reasons the gospel encounters resistance worldwide, even today.

this story a fulfillment of that promise?

7. If the girl's owners react so strongly against Paul because he has taken away their source of money, do you think others will act similarly when Christians seek to liberate people who are enslaved for the sake of making money? For instance, when we seek to liberate those enslaved by the sex trade?
8. The good news is not always understood as good news to everyone. To whom might it not be good news?
9. Who do we see around us who is oppressed or enslaved? To what might they be enslaved (don't just think spiritual here)? How can we help bring about liberation for these people? With your group, make a list of concrete steps we could take together as a congregation.

### Works Cited

Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

To recover damages, the girl's owners drag Paul and Silas into the marketplace to face the authorities. The charges the owners bring against Paul and Silas deal less with their direct actions and more with the consequences they perceive might happen if they are allowed to move about unchecked. They are accused of "disturbing the city." Furthermore, they are Jews, that is, outsiders and likely unfriendly to the Empire. The power of religion to solidify civic unity was well known, so outsiders peddling a foreign god could be seen as disturbing the community's social fabric. Therefore, Paul and Silas are "advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe" (v. 20). These charges serve not only to convince the authorities but to incite the crowd as well.

Sensing the danger of an outright riot by the city's people over this matter, the magistrates made a swift decision. Paul and Silas are ordered to be stripped, beaten, and thrown into jail. The sentence is carried out, and they are handed over to the jailer, who puts them in the most secure place in the jail, the innermost room. To guard against any escape, he also has their feet fastened in stocks. Barring a miracle, there would be no escape.

### The Escape...Kind Of: Acts 16:25-40

That night, around midnight, we are told, Paul and Silas were engaged in a worship service! Having supreme confidence that their current circumstance was of little consequence, the pair prayed and sang hymns to God. How many of us would have done the same? Their attitude and confidence in God provided them with an opportunity to bear witness to the good news to the entire cell block. As they sang and prayed, all of the prisoners listened.

Then, suddenly, there was an earthquake. The earthquake was strong enough to shake the foundations of the jail, causing the doors to open, but not strong enough to bring the entire place down. Not only that, but the shackles that held everyone in place were unfastened. Luke, the author of Acts, does not tell us that God caused this earthquake, but we can assume it. That an earthquake could open locked doors is believable. It is a little more suspicious that everyone's chains were unfastened without divine intervention. Surely this seismic event has been divinely orchestrated.

The jailer wakes up and assesses the situation. Seeing that the jail doors are open, he fears the worst. To avoid the public shame that would come on him and his family because he had failed at his job, he draws his sword to kill himself. Seeing that all of the prisoners were still there, Paul calls out to the jailer to stop.

In response, the jailer calls for lights and rushes in to see Paul and demands to know what he must do to be saved. We must understand this question in light

of its social context. The jailer, in all likelihood, knew nothing of Paul's God. Earthquakes and the like were believed to be signs that the gods were unhappy with people and, as such, were signs of the gods' judgment against them. The jailer merely wanted to know what to do to avoid this judgment. Paul seizes the opportunity to proclaim to him all about Jesus.

We might assume that the jailer's house was adjacent to the jail because Paul is then directly allowed to speak to everyone in the jailer's home. Without delay, upon hearing the good news that Paul delivers, the jailer tends to the men's wounds. Paul then baptizes the jailer and his entire family. Then the whole family engages in a celebratory meal at their newfound salvation. The demon-possessed slave girl was indeed right: Paul and Silas do bring with them the opportunity for salvation.

When morning comes, the authorities send word to the jail that Paul and Silas may be released. At this point, Paul reveals to them that he is indeed a Roman citizen. He demands that the authorities come down and release them themselves. It would have been unlawful for a Roman citizen to be beaten and imprisoned without a trial and a conviction. The magistrates could get in trouble if the matter came to light. Paul and Silas receive an apology and are quietly asked to leave the city.

Before leaving, however, they stop by Lydia's house, where they gather with the believers, perhaps even the jailer and his family, to offer encouragement. Paul and Silas have been faithful and have suffered for it. Their suffering was not without great reward. Paul and his companions arrive in Philippi, and there find no followers of Christ. They leave having proclaimed the gospel in word and deed. Their faithfulness has resulted in the salvation of a few and the beginning of a church in that city.

### **So What?**

We may often wonder, if the gospel is really good news for the entire world, why do we not have an easier time spreading it? Why do we encounter resistance of all types when we announce Jesus' plan to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight (spiritual and physical!) to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free (see Luke 4:16-21)?

The answer is sometimes very simple: money. The economics of the Kingdom of God are not the same as the economics of the world at large. One does not have to look too hard to see that our world, even our country, is filled with those who are poor and captive to all kinds of things, chief among which is indebtedness. While we might have a hard time swallowing the fact that there are indeed oppressed people in our great nation, it does not make it less true.

The reality is that everywhere we go, there are people who are captive and

oppressed, and those who hold them captive and who oppress them, sometimes directly, but most often not in a direct manner, do not want to relinquish their control because it would cost them money. The CEO, concerned only about the bottom line, does not pay his workers a proper wage because it will cost him money. Underpaid workers then get trapped in cycles of poverty and become enslaved to other things like drugs and alcohol. The CEO will fight anyone who might encourage or liberate his workers.

Of course, that's a simplistic example. The truth is that those who have power and money, more often than not, have and hold it at the expense of others. The slave girl's owners in the story made money by exploiting the girl and the demon who possessed her. Paul brought liberation to the girl, and it made the owners mad. The good news that Jesus brings is not always welcomed as good news by those who seek to exploit others, and it is our job to be faithful in telling this good news even when it means that we will experience harsh reactions from those who have the most to lose from the liberation of the exploited, oppressed and poor. May we have the courage of Paul and Silas, who, even after having been beaten and jailed, still sang hymns of praise to God.

### **Discussion Questions**

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. The demon-possessed slave girl follows Paul and his companions around saying, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." What do you think she meant by this statement?
2. How do you think people who were not acquainted with the Jewish faith would have understood "Most High God?"
3. The slave girl also confesses that Paul offers "a way of salvation." How might that differ from saying that Paul offer "the" way of salvation?
4. The NRSV states that Paul is "annoyed" (verse 18). The original Greek means something like, "deeply troubled." Why do you think Paul was deeply troubled by this girl's words?
5. Why do the girls' owners want to punish Paul and his companions? What did they lose?
6. Jesus, in Luke 4, said that he was bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight (spiritual and physical!) to the blind, and was going to let the oppressed go free. How is