

Paul & Silas in Prison



Ice-Breaker

What type of music lifts your spirits? What music reminds you of the "good ol' days"?



Scripture Passage

Acts 16:16-40

16Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. 17This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." 18She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

19When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. 20They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar 21by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

22The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. 23After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. 24Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 26Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. 27The 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. 28But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

29The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. 30He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

31They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." 32Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. 33At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. 34The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family.

35When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." 36The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace."

37But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."

38The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. 39They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. 40After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left.



Bible Study

1. How do you think a shouting slave girl affected the apostles' mood? Their goals?

2. Retell verses 17-21 from the perspective of the owners of the girl: What do you feel about her? About your money? About these missionaries?
3. Since there was no synagogue in Philippi (v. 13), and since the Gentile missionaries (Luke and Timothy) were not seized, how could racism be a factor in the actions described in verses 19-24? What might be meant by the charge against them?
4. In light of what happened, how do you think Paul and Silas felt in verse 25? If you were falsely accused, severely beaten and thrown into a dark jail, would you still trust in God's plan (vv. 23-30)? Why or why not?
5. What does the response of Paul and Silas show about them? If you were the jailer, what would you think of Paul and Silas singing? Remaining?
6. What kind of man was the jailer before his salvation? In what ways does the jailer express his new faith in Jesus?
7. Given the charge against them (vv. 20-21), why would Paul insist on his rights as a Roman citizen?

Reference Notes

16:16 a spirit by which she predicted the future. Literally, "a spirit, a python." A snake was supposed to guard the oracle of Delphi and thus became a common symbol of a fortune-teller. This slave girl's value to her owners lay in her occult abilities.

16:17 the Most High God. A common way for both Jews and Gentiles to refer to the Supreme God. the way to be saved. For Gentile pagans, this would mean deliverance from the powers of fate and impersonal forces.

16:18 While what the girl said was true, the spirit that motivated her was not one Paul desired as a collaborator in his mission. Undoubtedly, it attracted attention but made Paul and Silas appear more as magicians than as representatives of God. Thus, Paul commanded the spirit to leave her. Williams notes that the same strong word of command is used by Jesus when facing a demoniac (Luke 8:29).

16:19 their hope of making money was gone. Luke adds a touch of irony by using the same verb here as he did in verse 18 to describe the departure of the spirit. The girl's worth to her masters was only in her gift of fortune-telling. As far as they were concerned, Paul had not delivered a girl from the power of evil, but had violated their property rights. seized Paul and Silas. The fact that Paul and Silas were seized while Luke and Timothy were not may be due to the racial prejudice against Jews that is more clearly seen in verse 20. authorities. These were the duumvirs, two magistrates elected annually who held session in the public square. Excavations that date back to the second century show that the jail bordered the square.

16:20 The charges do not refer to the owners' economic loss, but focus on two assertions sure to create public opposition: first, the men were creating a public disturbance; and second, they were advocating illegal actions against the state. Tied in with these charges is an open prejudice against Jews. The first charge was, of course, false. Any public attention to the missionaries was caused by the slave girl's strange pronouncements, not their own actions. The second charge rests on the fact that Roman citizens were not to practice any religion forbidden by the state. Although this law was

rarely enforced, its usefulness lay in allowing Rome the opportunity to crush any extremist groups that threatened Roman authority. Otherwise, people were left alone. While Paul's activity with the servant girl was hardly a threat to Roman power, the mere fact of the accusation coupled with ethnic prejudice against Jews was enough to set popular opinion against them.

16:22 *stripped and beaten.* The authorities should have put Paul and Silas in custody to be formally tried; but, pressured by the crowds, they publicly beat them without trial. Flogging was a severe punishment, as the victim was whipped by a rod which the magistrates carried as a symbol of their judicial authority to exercise judgment. See Paul's comments on this in 2 Corinthians 11:25 and 1 Thessalonians 2:2. Marshall assumes the magistrates probably intended to simply jail Paul and Silas overnight and order them to leave town the next day.

16:24 *he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.* Why these prisoners were considered worthy of such precautions is uncertain, but it sets up a contrast with God's ability to free them in spite of the security measures taken to oppress them. The stocks were locked wooden boards that clasped about one's ankles, making walking, or any movement, impossible. The reader is to imagine Paul and Silas, backs badly bruised, crippled by stocks, locked away in a dark cell.

16:25 The contrast between their attitude and their situation is immense! In spite of their pain and humiliation, these prisoners were singing hymns and praying to God, unwittingly bearing witness to the other prisoners. The Greek verb implies their fellow captors listened intently to Paul and Silas.

16:26 Earthquakes are not uncommon in the area; what was notable about this one was its timing! the prison doors flew open. The elaborate security measures had no effect when God's time for deliverance had come.

16:27 *The jailer ... was about to kill himself.* The punishment for a guard who allowed his prisoners to escape was that which the prisoner was to have received. Whether this would have been the case under such abnormal circumstances is uncertain, but the jailer preferred sudden death by his own hand rather than going through the public humiliation of a trial and execution by the authorities. His action was interrupted by Paul's assurance that no one had escaped.

16:29-30 The combined factors of the stories of Paul's preaching (vv. 17-18), their prayers while imprisoned, and the earthquake were enough to lead the jailer to acknowledge that Paul and Silas must be indeed God's agents. His question fits in with the report of the slave girl: he wanted to know how he might be spared the effects of divine anger.

16:31 *Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.* Paul's response is summed up in this single phrase: deliverance from the power of evil and from divine judgment is given to those who entrust themselves to Jesus as their Lord. Jesus is the Savior to those who respond to him as Lord. you and your household. See note on verse 15. This summary statement was followed by a late-night teaching session about Jesus in the jailer's house, which was probably attached to the prison itself.

16:33-34 The belief of the jailer was shown both by the fact that he washed the prisoners' wounds and was himself washed by the water of baptism. Given the hour of the night and the fact that they could not have left the house, this baptism was probably by pouring or sprinkling. This was followed by a meal at which Paul may have led in the Lord's Supper.

16:34 *he was filled with joy.* Luke's characteristic way of expressing the dominant emotion that accompanies faith (Luke 2:10; 24:52; Acts 2:46; 5:41; 8:39; 11:23; 13:48; 15:3).

16:35-40 The following morning, the police came to the prison with orders from the magistrates to send Paul and Silas on their way. It does not appear they connected the earthquake with the imprisonment of the missionaries. They simply wanted to expel Paul and Silas from town to avoid any further trouble. However, the missionaries refused to go without a personal apology from the magistrates for their breach of justice. This was not simply a matter of self-vindication nor a matter of insisting on the proper administration of justice, as deserved as these things were under the circumstances. It was especially important for the protection of the young church in Philippi, since Paul's claim to citizenship showed he was not interested in violating Roman customs as he had been charged (v. 21). By being escorted out of the prison by the magistrates, a signal would be communicated to the community at large that the charges had been false. As a result, the community would be more likely to leave the young church alone.

16:37 While local magistrates could execute punishment upon troublemakers without a trial, that was never to be the case when it was a Roman citizen who was charged. Citizenship included the right to a trial for any accusations. In the Roman Empire, most residents did not have the legal protection or status of a citizen. Citizenship was conferred only upon those born in certain cities (as in Paul's case), or those who could afford a bribe to pay for the privilege (Acts 22:28). The magistrates had overlooked the possibility that these two Jews might be citizens. If Paul reported their action to a higher authority, they could be in danger of losing their office. Travelers such as Paul and Silas might have been able to prove their citizenship by carrying with them a small wooden tablet that noted their birthplace and status as citizens.

16:39 The magistrates did what they could to appease Paul and Silas, but still asked them to leave the city to avoid any further commotions by the community. Had that occurred, Paul and Silas would have to have been imprisoned for their safety until trial. Not wanting to face the possibility of that type of detention, the missionaries encouraged the young church and went on to Thessalonica. Since the next "we" section does not occur until Paul passes through Macedonia once again (20:5), Luke apparently was left behind to strengthen the young church and train its leaders.

Caring Time

1. The girl's owners rejected the Gospel because it cost them financially. What financial concerns keep some people from faith today? Are any of these a factor for you?
2. About 12 years later, Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians from another prison. How could the events here be the basis for what Paul said in Philippians 4:4-7, 12-13? What can you learn from his example about knowing peace and joy, even in hard times?
3. If asked, "What must I do to be saved?" how would you answer?