

MAIN POINT

When we follow a suffering Savior, God uses even the deepest pain for our good and His glory.

INTRODUCTION

Spend a few minutes discussing the news stories from the headlines this week. Of these stories, how many are related to evil or suffering?

What are some of the ways people respond to events like these? What questions are often raised?

As a Christian, what is the appropriate response to suffering, and what makes that response challenging?

Living in a broken world involves suffering, and our suffering will be magnified when we choose to follow Christ. Paul faced opposition, arrest, imprisonment, and physical abuse—not to mention the unnamed “thorn in the flesh” which tormented him. But his Christ-centered view of life kept him from bitterness and allowed him to see that when we follow a suffering Savior, God uses even the deepest pain for our good and His glory.

UNDERSTANDING

> READ ACTS 16:1-15.

How do you think Paul might have felt after twice being prevented from carrying out his intentions (vv. 6-7)?

How do you think that experience shaped Paul’s faith? How do such experiences shape our faith?

The Holy Spirit led Paul to the town of Troas. Paul knew God had some purpose for it, but he had no idea what it was. Then, in the middle of the night Paul had a vision of a Macedonian man calling for him to come help them. From that vision Paul was directed to a new ministry in Macedonia (16:6-10).

What does Paul and his companions’ response to the Macedonian man’s request indicate about their basic ministry purpose?

Paul and his fellow missionaries' quick response to the Holy Spirit's leading reveals they felt compelled to share the gospel wherever and whenever God called them to do so. The vision occurred one night; they departed the next day and traveled to Philippi.

> READ ACTS 16:16-24.

Have you ever been in a situation like Paul and Silas—when you did the right thing but people responded badly to it? When?

What does this scene from Paul's ministry tell us about the consequences that may come from our gospel ministry?

Paul and Silas were having a really bad day. It started with being annoyed and just got worse from there. They were seized and dragged, lied about, beaten, and eventually thrown in jail. Everything they faced stemmed from their ministry in Jesus' name. While this was not the ideal circumstance for these missionaries to find themselves in, we learn about the appropriate response to suffering from their example. As the next verses shows, Paul's Christ-centered view of life kept him from bitterness and helped him make his suffering about God's glory.

> READ ACTS 16:25-26.

Why do you think the other prisoners were listening with such interest to Paul and Silas? What was unusual about their behavior?

What did their actions communicate about God?

The situation looked ominous for Paul and Silas. They were successful in reaching Lydia for Christ and liberating a slave girl from Satan's control. But their success got them in trouble. They were beaten and jailed. Instead of letting fear hush their testimony of Jesus, however, Paul and Silas turned their prison cell into a worship center. Instead of mourning their pain, they gave themselves to worshiping God by praying and singing to Him. Luke said they sang hymns, or songs of praise directed to God. Every word they uttered in prayer and song reflected the joy and peace God gave them in their ordeal.

In addition to prayer and singing, what are some ways we can praise God in the midst of our circumstances?

How might these actions reveal the power and presence of God to others?

Paul and Silas's expressions of worship served as testimonies about the Lord to the people around them. Luke indicated that the other prisoners listened as the two missionaries worshiped God. Just as Paul and Silas, we should express faith in God by turning to Him when we find ourselves in difficult situations.

When you face the "midnight," or the overwhelming times of your life, how do you generally respond? How can Paul and Silas' example change your perspective?

What is the source of our hope and joy? How does this affect your outlook on your life's situations?

From Paul's example we are reminded that we can consistently show through our words and actions that we know Jesus and have His joy in us. As we will see, such lifestyles can open up opportunities to tell others about the gospel. The turn of events for the jailer started when Paul and Silas were locked up in his prison. What Paul and Silas did in prison shows us the value of a lifestyle of worshiping and serving God. Such a lifestyle opens wide the door of possibilities for us to tell the people observing us about Jesus Christ.

> READ ACTS 16:27-34.

Verse 28 tells us that none of the prisoners tried to escape when their chains broke free. What does this tell us about Paul's and Silas's ministry efforts and their impact on the lives of the prisoners?

How did their decision to stay impact the jailer?

Suddenly an earthquake shook the foundations of the prison and broke loose the fetters of the prisoners. The prison doors flew open, but no one fled. Their decision to stay put made an eternal difference in the life of the jailer. Responsible for what happened, he knew he had no other choice but to take his own life. Otherwise, he would be executed for allowing the prisoners to escape. That's when Paul and Silas came to the jailer's rescue. First, they convinced him none of the prisoners had escaped, which saved his life from execution. Then they shared Christ with him, which would save his life for eternity.

APPLICATION

What is the main takeaway for you from Paul's example in Acts 16?

How does the manner in which we respond to suffering give opportunities for Christian witness?

How does the manner in which we respond to suffering sometimes negate a Christian witness?

What are some ways you or our group can encourage others who find themselves in times of suffering and struggle?

Why should suffering for the sake of the gospel increase our boldness (as it did Paul's), rather than decrease it? What can we be confident in amid suffering?

PRAY

Close by taking a few minutes to hear the prayer concerns of your group. Other than urgent prayer needs, ask group members to focus their prayers on specific areas in which they need an attitude adjustment toward their circumstances. Close with a prayer of encouragement for your group, challenging them to pursue Christ this week. Thank God for the examples of Paul and others who show us how to glorify God even in the midst of suffering.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following:

1. Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:

Who do you have the opportunity to encourage by the way you live for Christ?

Are you taking full advantage of that opportunity? What steps could you take to set a better example?

2. The challenge to memorize Acts 16:25.

COMMENTARY

ACTS 16:1-40

16:1-5. At Lystra, Paul invited a young disciple named Timothy—son of a Jewish woman and Greek man—to join him. Paul circumcised Timothy not because he was caving in to pressure from “believers from the party of the Pharisees” (15:5), but rather to show respect for Jewish law and identity given the fact that Timothy was half-Jewish. If Timothy had remained uncircumcised, it would seem to many Jews that he had rejected not just Mosaic law but also Jewish ethnicity. Paul’s continuing mentorship of Timothy throughout his ministry resulted in, among other things, the writing of two New Testament letters for his instruction. Besides evangelizing, Paul and his ministry partners conveyed the decisions of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about circumcision and Gentile converts. Paul wanted to make clear that Gentiles could believe in Jesus without adhering to Jewish rites. No doubt one of the reasons the churches in this Gentile-dominated region were strengthened in the faith and grew in number daily was that the Jerusalem Council had decided to minimize the burden imposed on Gentile believers.

16:6-9. Paul and his companions passed through the region of Galatia (probably visiting Iconium and Antioch), and were prevented by the Holy Spirit from preaching the message in Asia. They were also prevented by the Spirit of Jesus (i.e., Holy Spirit) from turning north into Bithynia. So they passed through Mysia and arrived at the coastal city of Troas in Asia. Luke did not indicate why the Spirit constrained Paul’s plans or by what method He made known the restrictions. Macedonia was not far in distance from Troas, an easy two-day trip by sailing vessel in favorable weather. Culturally, however, Macedonia was a far different world from Paul’s. It was Greek territory.

16:10-12. Luke is not named in the text, but he was the author of the Book of Acts and included himself in the “we” of 16:10. It is the first time in Acts that he used the first person pronoun to indicate his presence

with Paul. Paul had concluded right away that the vision was God's means of calling him to a Macedonian witness. Macedonia was a Roman province in northern Greece. Its eastern extremity was not far from Asia, just across the Dardanelles. Philippi was the main settlement in eastern Macedonia. The first stop on the voyage was Samothrace, an island on a direct line between Troas and Neapolis. Paul's party landed at Neapolis, the port city of Philippi. Philippi was about 10 miles inland on the Egnatian Way, a major Roman highway. It was a Roman colony. Thus it had a nucleus of Roman citizens, had a Roman style of city government, and was ruled by Roman law. Paul would find that his Roman citizenship would be significant during his stay there (Acts 16:35-40).

16:13-14. When Paul began work in a new city, his usual procedure was to seek out the Jewish synagogue for his first witness. Evidently Philippi did not have a sizable Jewish community, for it had no synagogue. Paul was able to locate a place of prayer beside a river outside the city gate where a group of women met on the Sabbath. One of them was named Lydia. She is described as a worshiper of God. In Acts the term worshiper of God (as well as "God-fearing," 10:22) was used of Gentiles who attended the Jewish synagogue and believed in the one true God. They were not full converts to Judaism. Converts were called proselytes and lived by the letter of the Jewish law. Worshipers of God generally did not observe the full Jewish law, especially its ceremonial aspects. They did not undergo circumcision or keep the strict dietary regulations of Judaism. Nevertheless, they were often devout supporters of the Jewish synagogues. A number of them, such as Cornelius, became Christian believers (Acts 10).

Lydia came from Thyatira in the Roman province of Asia. Thyatira was located in a region of Asia called Lydia. Quite possibly Lydia was not the woman's given name but the name by which she was known in Philippi—the woman from Lydia. Thyatira was noted for cloth dyed purple with a dye manufactured from the root of the madder plant, which was native to the Lydian region. This "royal" purple was reserved for finery, and Lydia was probably a businesswoman of some means. Unlike Philippi, which had no Jewish community, Thyatira had an extensive settlement of Jews. Lydia probably came to her faith in God under the influence of the Jews back home and brought her faith with her to Philippi. The other women who had gathered with her for Sabbath prayer were likely Gentile worshipers of God like herself. Indeed, she may have been the one who led them to their faith.

16:15-18. Lydia shared her Lord as well as her home. The text does not specify whether her household members responded to Paul's witness or to Lydia's testimony. The missionaries came in contact with a slave girl as they went to a place for prayer. Luke said the girl had a spirit of prediction. Emperors and military commanders in the Roman world sought individuals who had the slave girl's ability to predict their futures. Before making a decree or going into battle, they wanted to know the outcome. Consequently, a slave who had clairvoyant powers was a gold mine (of knowledge and money) for his or her owners. Because of her marketable ability, this slave girl's owners had figured out a way for her to engage in fortune-telling for a handsome fee. Their investment was productive because Luke said the slave girl's work made a large profit for her owners.

After the slave girl met Paul and his companions, she followed them as they walked to the place of prayer and cried out the truth about them and their mission. She identified them as slaves, but they didn't belong to anyone in Philippi. The girl exclaimed that they belonged to the Most High God, an expression for the Lord common among Jewish people. The people in the Gentile city probably interpreted what she said in the context of their pagan culture, which made her words about the way of salvation even more perplexing for them. The girl had a spirit of prediction because of Satan's direct control over her life. In order for her to stop, therefore, the demonic presence had to go. Paul knew that a command to the spirit in the name of Jesus Christ would liberate her from demonic tyranny. As Paul anticipated, the spirit promptly obeyed and left the slave girl. Luke added that the spirit left right away, indicating the complete authority of Jesus' name. A mob formed immediately and attacked the two missionaries, beating them severely before throwing them in prison and securing their feet in stocks so they couldn't escape. But as we will see, not even iron bars can hold back the gospel of Christ.

16:25-29. Paul and Silas's expressions of worship served as testimonies about the Lord to the people around them. Luke indicated that the other prisoners listened as the two missionaries worshiped God. Later,

God used them to keep the jailer from harming himself. In turn, the jailer went into his house and shared the message of the Lord that brought him new life. The transformation of the people in his household stemmed from listening to Paul and Silas as they worshiped God in their prison cell. A sudden and violent earthquake changed everything for Paul and Silas. The earthquake quivered the ground with such force that it shook the jail's foundations. All the doors in the jail burst open, and the chains holding the prisoners came loose, setting everyone free. The remarkable turn of events liberated the missionaries. But they didn't try to escape. Their decision to stay put made an eternal difference in the life of the jailer. The earthquake probably aroused him from sleep. Looking around, he assumed every prisoner had escaped because all the prison doors stood open. Responsible for what happened, he knew he had no other choice but to take his own life. Otherwise, he would be executed for allowing the prisoners to escape.

16:30-34. Notice the way Paul communicated with the jailer so he could be saved. The man's respect for Paul and Silas moved him to fall down in their presence and to address them as Sirs. Then the jailer asked them the question that led to the transformation of his life forever—What must I do to be saved? Paul and Silas responded simply and clearly—he would be saved if He put his faith in Christ, if he would believe on the Lord Jesus. Only personal faith in Jesus Christ, the one Mediator between God and sinners, would result in his salvation. Also, Paul and Silas told the jailer the persons in his household could be saved if they too trusted Christ. When the jailer took the two missionaries to his home that same hour of the night, he washed their wounds, and Paul and Silas spoke the message of the Lord with everyone there. As a result, each person in the jailer's family received Christ. Salvation always involves each individual's repentance and faith in Jesus. Along with the jailer, all of them were baptized.

16:37. Paul knew the laws regulating punishment of Roman citizens. Having been illegally beaten and denied trial, he refused to be released and pretend nothing had happened. Paul's Roman citizenship is mentioned here for the first time in Acts (see 22:25-29; 23:27; 25:11). Roman citizens were exempt from certain kinds of punishment (e.g., crucifixion) and were entitled to due process prior to punishment. The question arises as to how Paul would have proven his citizenship. There probably was a register in Tarsus that recorded his citizenship, but citizens also often carried small wooden tablets (some of which have been found), something like a modern passport, that they used to prove their citizenship. Perhaps Paul carried such a document.

16:38-39. The fear of the magistrates is understandable. Philippi was a Roman colony that followed Roman law. Many people in the town would have known about the rights of a Roman citizen. Though not obligated to do so, Paul and Silas chose to count the apology as amends for the wrongs they had suffered.