

Acts 16:16-40

The Gospel in all Circumstances

Learning Objectives

- God occasionally leads us to the path of more resistance
- Recognizing Paul and Silas' example in using circumstances, no matter how many times they change, to advance the Gospel

Pray for your time together as a group.

? Acts 16:16-40 is an emotional rollercoaster! Paul and Silas experience several highs, lows and sharp turns. Their circumstances start a chain reaction of emotional ups and downs for other people in the passage as well. Do you like roller coasters, or do you wait for the roller coaster riders to be safe on the ground? Have you ever had a bad roller coaster experience?

Leader's Note: Refresh your group's memory that the "we" (first person plural) indicates that Luke (the author of this book) joined Paul and Silas on this journey. Luke therefore saw this situation/experience/set of circumstances firsthand.

Read Out Loud: Acts 16:16-24 (NIV)

¹⁶ Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She 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." ¹⁸ She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed 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.

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

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

Leader's Note: About miracles and demon possession—make sure that your discussion doesn't focus solely on these topics. We don't want to lose steam on what happened, so much as focus on how Paul

and Silas responded. If your group sidebars into this conversation, please feel free to read the Optional Transition below. We also would encourage planning outside time to discuss this if your group wants to go deeper into this topic.

Optional Read to the Group: “Demon possession was not uncommon at the time when Jesus was alive. Jesus cast out demons during his time on Earth, and taught his disciples to do so (see Mark 9:14-29). If you want to read more examples of Jesus and his disciples casting out demons, see Matthew 8:16, Matthew 10:8, Luke 10:17, 2 Corinthians 10:3-4, Ephesians 6:12, and 1 Peter 5:8-9.”

? The demon-possessed slave followed Paul and Silas shouting about their work, which seems like it should have been a positive thing. Why then was Paul “annoyed” (vs.17-18)?

Possible Answers: This was actually a negative thing, even though the words she was saying were true. There was a chance that people would associate them with the demon-possessed slave (and by extension, with demons), which would completely undermine their work and legitimacy.

? How does Paul’s response to this situation further the Gospel?

Possible Answers: Paul did not allow this demon’s words to smear his reputation as a believer or the reputation of other believers in the area. He cast out the demon, freeing a woman from spiritual slavery and preserving the opportunity for the Gospel to advance.

? The slave girl’s owners brought Paul and Silas to the authorities and lied about their work to make sure they were punished. Why do you think they responded that way?

Possible Answers: The owners were furious that they couldn’t make money from the slave girl any more now that she was freed from the demon. Their response was extreme, but they also lost a significant amount of income and status from losing the slave girl’s special powers. The owners were concerned with self-preservation, not morality.

? Paul and Silas were basically punished for doing a good thing. How do you deal with it when you are unfairly treated after doing something good?

Possible Answers: People’s answers will be personal. Leaders: it may be beneficial to find an example from your own life you are comfortable sharing to start the discussion.

Read Out Loud: Acts 16:25-40 (NIV)

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’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! We are all here!”

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then 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—you and your household.” ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. ³⁴ The 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 household.

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

³⁷ But 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.”

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

? How did Paul and Silas behave when they were imprisoned (vs. 25)? Why is this significant?

Possible Answers: Paul and Silas were singing hymns and praying in prison. They didn’t lose hope, and they didn’t despair. It was certainly not the usual response to people thrown in prison, and the stark contrast of their behavior was a witness to everyone in the building.

? God sent a miraculous earthquake to free Paul and Silas (and, incidentally, everyone else in the prison). Why didn’t Paul and Silas leave immediately?

Possible Answers: Paul and Silas had done nothing wrong. If they fled it would seem like they were guilty, but they stayed instead, despite the obvious spiritual intervention that showed the prison couldn’t contain them. They were at peace with where the Lord had them. They knew there was work to be done, and Good News to be shared, right there in the jail.

? Paul and Silas knew the Roman law, that if a jailer’s prisoner escaped, he was held liable and would pay their punishment (See Acts 12:19). What was it about Paul and Silas’ response that showed the jailer the gospel and brought about a radical heart change in him? *Possible Answers: The jailer was ready to commit suicide rather than face suffering and death. They knew that if they left, the jailer would suffer, and they were willing to put the jailer and his needs above their own freedom. Furthermore, they cared about his soul and his family and their well-being! When they told him the prisoners were all there, even*

though they had, had a chance to run, he knew Paul and Silas were men of God and he knew he needed that God!

? What do you think were the repercussions of the jailer's change of heart and decision to follow God?

Possible Answers: Following God is a life change. It probably affected all areas of his life, and the ripples would be felt by his superiors, by the prisoners he watched over, by his family, and by himself. He would become a highly visible witness of God's power to change lives and hearts and save people (due to his position where he interacted with many people).

? What circumstances has God changed in your life that you thought might destroy you, but were used for good instead?

Possible Answers: These answers will be personal and subjective. These stories will be powerful, so make sure to give people enough time to share! If your group is not comfortable sharing these in a large group setting, discuss this in accountability groups instead.

? The magistrates order that Paul and Silas be released the morning, but they would be sent out quietly.

Why does Paul insist on public vindication?

Possible Answers: Public vindication was necessary for a public mistake that defamed the character of the church in Philippi. Paul was concerned with the future of the church this area - if people believed he was a lawbreaker and disturber of the peace, the advancement of the Gospel would suffer. Paul insists on being escorted out by the magistrates as visible proof of their innocence and a precedent for future interactions between believers and the authorities.

? What does Paul's persistence say about Christians' relationship with those in authority?

Possible Answers: Christians can stand up for their own rights and the rights of others within the framework of a non-Christian government. Christians do not have to endure slander or mistrials without any recourse to the establishment.

Roman Citizens vs.
Non-Citizens

"Roman citizenship carried with it certain privileges. These Philippian authorities were alarmed because it was illegal to whip a Roman citizen. In addition, every citizen had the right to a fair trial—which Paul and Silas had not been given." (NIV Life Application Bible note on verse 38, pg. 1993, ©1991)

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? The magistrates, unconvinced by the miracle, still asked

Paul and Silas to leave. How can this apply to our understanding of gospel growth today?

Possible Answers: The advance of the Gospel doesn't always happen in one fell swoop. Paul and Silas are consistently concerned with the growth of the gospel, and provide an excellent example of kingdom focus. Even in that mindset, they leave after they're asked and exonerated. We can be focused on the gospel's advance and still recognize when it's time to celebrate our current victories and move on. A jailer's life and the lives of his family were forever changed: that's a victory to celebrate even in light of the magistrates' stubbornness.

? In light of the journey God leads Paul and Silas on, why do you think God guides us on paths other than the easiest one?

Possible Answers: God can see the big picture, and He doesn't waste any experiences in our lives. When he leads us on a harder path, we grow in faith and trust and confidence in Him, and those around us see how God carries and supports us in every situation. For Paul and Silas, He had a bigger plan for them than they had, had for themselves!

? Circumstances affect different people in different ways: the magistrates and the jailer (and the slave owners and the slave) all reacted very differently to Paul and Silas, and to God's miraculous earthquake. Whom do you relate to most in this account? Why?

Possible Answers: Answers will vary. Group members may identify with the slave girl's owners if they're not believers, and may not understand the gospel yet. Some may be newer believers celebrating God's good news like the jailer, eager to share it with their friends and family. Some may relate to Paul and Silas, and desire nothing more than the gospel's advancement.

? What was the last thing Paul and Silas did before leaving? Why do you think they did that?

Possible Answers: Paul and Silas took time to encourage the believers there before they left. Their chief concern throughout this account has been advancing the gospel. They had experienced public hardship, and wanted to make sure their fellow believers were encouraged and strengthened by the outcome, not discouraged by the process. Paul and Silas give us an example for keeping ourselves gospel-focused even in the most unfavorable circumstances.

For Discussion and Accountability

? What is a circumstance you have been struggling with? How can you use that situation as an opportunity to witness to those around you?

? Paul and Silas were not alone in their aggravating situation. How can this small group come together to better support each other and encourage gospel-focus when difficult situations arise?