



THE GATES OF HELL WILL NOT PREVAIL

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Last week, as Paul and his team were ministering in the Macedonian city of Philippi, we addressed the question: How will the missionaries make an impact with the gospel in a thoroughly pagan culture? We observed that Luke made no mention of what Paul or Silas preached, rather his focus was on how they lived, suggesting that non-believers must first “see” Jesus before they’ll want to “hear” about Jesus. When a slave girl with an evil spirit confronted Paul, Luke records how Paul cast the spirit out in the name of Jesus. It was a public cry for justice in streets of Philippi, declaring that exploiting others for greed has no place in the kingdom of God and that a daughter’s life is worth more than any profits derived from exploiting another human being. This was the gospel message made visible.

But not everyone in Philippi was pleased. Having lost their source of income, the girl’s owners attacked Paul and Silas and dragged them to the marketplace to face the magistrates. In a scene that was remarkably similar to Jesus’ trial, the Roman officials, pressured by a violent crowd inflamed by prejudice and national pride, ordered Paul and Silas to be beaten with rods with no investigation or legal defense. After they were beaten bloody raw they were placed in the custody of a jailor, who secured them in the innermost prison and fastened their feet in stocks. Looking back on the day, it appeared as if God’s hand had re-enacted Jesus’ trial, sentencing and flogging, so that the citizens of Philippi could witness what God’s love looks like.

Though our faith might be shaken if we suffered such gross injustice, Jesus had made it clear to his disciples that this was the way his kingdom would come to earth, but God would have the last word and would vindicate his servants (Luke 6:22–23; 9:22–24; 21:16–19). “Following the example of their Lord (Luke 22:42, 51; 23:34, 43, 46) they submitted to evil treatment, so embracing the cross and depending on God for vindication.”¹

In this passage, we will address two questions:

1. How do we strengthen our faith when we are suffering unjustly?
2. How does God vindicate us?

Then answer to the first question is found in our opening verse Acts 16:25.

I. Vindication by God (Acts 16:25–34)

A. Strengthening their faith praying the Psalms

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them... (Acts 16:25 ESV)

Trials normally took place in the morning, so by midnight Paul and Silas had probably been in the prison for twelve hours with nothing to eat. Despite their hunger and their bruised bodies with swollen backs, bloody and raw from the lictors’ rods and their pained legs and feet secured in the wooden stocks —Paul and Silas

Acts 16:25–40

35th Message

Brian Morgan

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are “praying and singing hymns” (or better translated “*praying by singing psalms*”).² This is the eleventh time in the book of Acts that Luke has mentioned that the disciples are praying. Like Jesus, the disciples have learned to make prayer their natural response to a crisis. However, if you wanted to pray at midnight when people are trying to sleep in close quarters, one would think the polite thing to do would be to *whisper*, or better yet, *pray silently*. But not Paul and Silas; they unabashedly sing with as much life and soul as a gospel choir. There must have been something mysteriously soothing in their voices for “the prisoners were listening to them.” Instead of the coarse language and hateful cursing that normally fills prison cells, on this night the prisoners were treated to a concert of praise.

You may wonder, why are they singing? The answer is that the Psalms were written to be sung. Singing takes poetry to a whole new level. As Bruce Waltke affirms,

The psalmist concentrates his enthusiasm, joy and thoughts in artful poetry, a sustained rhythm in a continuously operating principle of organization. These songs and hymns unite fervency with dignity, joy with seriousness, and exultation with humility. They are aesthetically pleasing, emotionally stirring and motivationally powerful to inspire appropriate behavior. Science all but confirms that humans are hard-wired to respond to music.³

As Cassandra Sheppard writes in an article entitled, “The Neuroscience of Singing,”

The neuroscience of singing shows that when we sing our neurotransmitters connect in new and different ways. It fires up the right temporal lobe of our brain, releasing endorphins that make us smarter, healthier, happier and more creative. When we sing with other people this effect is amplified...What has not been understood until recently is that singing in groups triggers the communal release of serotonin and oxytocin, the bonding hormone, and even synchronizes our heart beats.⁴

There is something about a choir and about people singing together. When you sing with your whole heart, the Spirit is in the air. Being filled with the Spirit doesn’t mean get more of the Spirit, it means to “fill out” in full measure the Spirit that resides in you.

Throughout the Psalms we often find all the rulers of the earth standing against “the LORD and his Anointed (Ps 2:2).” But God scoffs at them, for he says, “I have set my king, on Zion” (v. 6), and all the king must do to bring God’s rule from heaven to earth is to pray (“ask of me,” v. 8), and God will make the nations his inheritance (v. 8). “Vindication” becomes an important theme in the Psalms, for God had a legal obligation to “save” his “anointed” from his enemies, while the king had the obligation to pray (Ps 2:6–9). When God answered the king’s prayers and “saved” him, the king was publicly “vindicated” as God’s “anointed” son (Ps 4:3). Thus the king prays, “Vindicate me...according to your righteousness” (Ps

35:24). These prayers find their fulfillment in Jesus, the Messiah and become our inheritance, for we are “in Christ.”

If you are wondering what psalms they might have been singing, I scanned though the Psalter and found more examples than I could count. These verses are some of the verses that would have especially resonated with them:

I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.
I have set the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.
(Ps 16:7–8)

Weeping may come to lodge for the night,
but a shout of joy comes with the morning. (Ps 30:5b)
By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life. (Psa 42:8)

Though we can't be sure what psalms they were singing, I found four verses from Psalm 119 that could have been featured on the front cover of their LITURGY FOR PRISON.

Your statutes have been my songs
in the house of my sojourning.
I remember your name in the night, O LORD,
and keep your law.
Though the cords of the wicked ensnare me,
I do not forget your law.
At midnight I rise to praise you,
because of your righteous judgments. (Ps 119:54–55, 61–62)

B. Open doors, open hearts

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. (Acts 16:25–26)

Unjustly bound by the chains of the wicked, at midnight Paul and Silas “rise to praise” God for his acts of faithfulness for delivering his people. The most significant account of deliverance was the Exodus, which was initiated at “midnight” when God struck down every firstborn in Egypt (Exod 11:4; 12:29). Paul and Silas didn’t have to wait long for an answer, for as their sacrifices of praise ascend like sweet incense toward heaven, applause thunders from heaven. A violent earthquake shakes the foundations of the prison, doors fly open and all the fetters break loose from the prison walls. Miraculously the roof doesn’t cave in and the chains come free in such a way that no one is hurt. This is the second time Luke records that the earth shook in response to *praying the psalms* (Acts 4:31). The earthquake is an apt metaphor for the power of God’s kingdom breaking in upon the earth, shaking the foundations of idolatrous world systems (Heb 12:26–29). You’ll remember that it was the dramatic sign of God’s vindication of Jesus at his resurrection. The apostle John further develops the imagery of the power unleashed in heaven and subsequently upon the earth through our prayers. In the eighth chapter of Revelation he writes,

... the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. (Rev 8:4–5)

Strengthen your faith by reading the Psalms, or better yet, sing them and perhaps like Paul and Silas you’ll find yourselves in sync with God’s purposes. To help us pray the Psalms, Emily and I keep a copy of the Psalms on our dining room table. Before each meal we read a psalm together, then we thank God for the food. It’s been a simple, yet profoundly rewarding exercise, praying through the entire Psalter twice in a year.

B. The jailer saved from death

When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” (16:27–29)

When the jailer awoke and saw that the doors of the jail were unhinged and he heard no sound of injured prisoners, he assumed the worst—that everyone had escaped. Since he was specifically responsible to guard the prisoners “securely,” there was only one course open to remedy his shame—suicide. Just as the jailer is about to fall on his sword Paul shouted for him not to harm himself, for all the prisoners were still present. This speaks well of Paul’s spiritual leadership; even though he was the newest arrival in the prison, he was able to convince all the prisoners to remain. Keener says it well,

Having spiritually liberated a slave in Acts 16:18, Paul the “slave” of the Highest God (16:17) now refuses physical liberation in order to serve others.⁵

Paul is so law-abiding and respectful toward the Roman colony’s authority that he does not try to escape even when he has the opportunity; divine intervention on his behalf (which implies his innocence) does not undermine public security.⁶

In all their writings the apostles were adamant about the importance of maintaining a good reputation with governing authorities, granting them our obedience (paying taxes), goodwill and respect. The church has a prophetic role to call governing authorities to account for injustice, as Paul does later in this account, but doing so in a way that preserves the honor of the office (Rom 13:1–7; 1 Pet 2:13–17).

C. The jailer seeks salvation

And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” (16:29–31)

The jailer calls for lights (perhaps symbolic that his “eyes” are about to be opened) and rushes into the darkness of the innermost cells. Trembling in fear, he falls down before Paul and Silas. His fear is extreme, for he knows Paul and Silas have been on a religious mission and he knows the traditional beliefs that the gods cause earthquakes. He probably imagines that the magistrates’ unjust treatment of them triggered the earthquake. The combination of the earthquake and Paul’s extraordinary kindness completely changes his perception of the missionaries. Before he saw them as foreign troublemakers and criminals who posed a threat to the Roman colony, but now he sees them as divine messengers who have saved his life. So he asks them “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” His physical life has already been saved, and now “he wished to be ‘saved’ permanently, perhaps from the wrath of their God demonstrated in the earthquake.”⁷ Just what was involved in this “salvation” that he was asking for, he probably had no clue, but what prompted him to ask was the extraordinary

quality of life he saw in these two men and he was convinced that they could show him the way.

Paul and Silas redirect the jailer's gaze away from themselves and onto to the Lord Jesus, saying, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." For a Roman citizen to acknowledge a rival Lord to Caesar would be extremely costly. Regardless of the cost, the apostles never backed down, for the benefits far outweighed the cost. For the gift of eternal life is sweetly contagious, such that if the head of a household would believe, they expected the family would follow suit. This was not based on a biblical promise guaranteeing the conversion of family members, (Luke 12:51-53), but rather upon the expectation that godly leaders will produce loving homes, which become fertile ground for faith to take root and flourish in their children and others living under their roof (Titus 1:6).

D. The jailer washes and was washed

And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God. (16:32-34)

The jailer was all too happy to bring Paul and Silas to his home, where they could explain the way of salvation more fully to the jailer's household. His joy is evidenced by his hospitality, but this also entails a huge risk. Removing prisoners from custody would have been considered gross negligence and could have cost the jailer his career and more. His hospitality is a sign that he has truly accepted the message. When Paul and Silas finished teaching, the jailer took them out to wash their wounds. This too was not without the risk of being found out, depending on where the source of the water came from, perhaps a public fountain or the jailer's courtyard.

I'm struck that Luke portrays the scene with no dialogue, so we are forced to imagine the scene in holy silence. Imagine this little flock making their way in the dark to a fountain under the light of the moon. No one is saying a word. Paul and Silas step into the fountain; the jailer gently pours several buckets of cool water over their tattered flesh; then there is the delicate removal of dried blood, gravel and dirt; then rinsing with more water; and finally the application of oil to soothe and heal. I suspect the jailer's emotions were similar to those of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea when they washed the body of Jesus. They gently hug, perhaps with tears of appreciation. And then—surprise—the washing is reciprocal as Paul and Silas return the favor and gently pour water over each member of the family with the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." The 4th century Church Father Chrysostom writes, "He [the jailer] washed and was washed; he washed them from their stripes, and he himself was washed from his sins."⁸

And just when you think, "It doesn't get better than this," it does. The jailer becomes the host for a love feast and Paul and Silas celebrate life in Christ together with the jailer's family. Keener notes that this is utterly remarkable, for "a normal jailer would never offer his own food, in his home, or in the middle of the night... further, dining with a prisoner, as here, would be punishable by death... He would at the very least lose his job if discovered."⁹ Nothing tastes better than food prepared by loving hands and sacrificial hearts.

This joy is not bound by time—it is well past midnight and dawn is approaching, but no one cares.

I'm struck that the *way* God vindicated his servants is not what we would expect. Though the earthquake was felt broadly, its significance was understood by only a few. Vindication occurred off the public stage in the intimacy of a home, amongst a family with regenerated hearts, while the rest of the city was sleeping. Does this help you with your expectations? Is this what is meant that the kingdom of God being like leaven, unseen, yet quietly permeating the world? It certainly speaks to God's lavish generosity and sacrificial love that he permits so much suffering by his servants for the benefit of just one family, but in God's eyes it is a precious family. Something most of you parents can identify with in respect to what you would sacrifice for your children. We want the world's applause; instead God serves us a sacrificial meal surrounded by love.

After Paul and Silas have been vindicated by God, they are vindicated by the authorities.

II. Vindication by Authorities (Acts 16:35-40)

A. Paul shames the authorities privately

But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace." But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out." (16:35-37)

After the excitement of the previous day had died down, the next morning the magistrates decided that the public beating and night in prison was sufficient to deter the preachers from continuing their activity in Philippi. So they sent the lictors (the "rod-carriers" who had beaten Paul and Silas) back to the jail to release them. When the jailer passes the word along to Paul and Silas, he adds, "go in peace," which communicates a bond of love the lictors know nothing about. Paul refuses and plays his trump card—Paul and Silas are Roman citizens who were illegally tried, beaten and imprisoned! The one who was publicly shamed now turns the tables on those who humiliated him. If the magistrates want Paul and Silas to leave Philippi, they must humble themselves and show them the courtesy due to Roman citizens by personally escorting them out of the prison.

B. The authorities honor Paul publicly

The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed. (16:38-40)

The charge that Roman citizens were unjustly treated was serious and it sent shock waves through the magistrates. As Keener explains,

If the magistrates had deprived Roman citizens of their legal rights, they could be removed from office and disqualified from holding public office again; a city could also lose privileges... Any act against Roman citizens' rights anywhere impacted Romans' liberty and honor everywhere. Cicero expresses such indignation particularly vehemently..."To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination, to slay him is almost an act of

murder: to crucify him is—what? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed.”¹⁰

Why do Paul and Silas raise the issue of their citizenship now, when they didn’t earlier? It may be that it was impossible to raise an objection and be heard by the magistrates when they were trying to govern an angry mob. We can’t be sure, but by raising the issue now, it is forcing the officials to swallow the shame they had laid upon Paul and Silas. By escorting them out of the prison in full public view, the magistrates were admitting their own wrong doing and exonerating Paul and Silas of any crimes. More importantly this public apology would serve to protect the newly formed little flock from future accusations that they posed a threat to the governing authorities.

It was a very awkward moment for the magistrates when they went to the jail with their deflated egos. Rather than issuing orders they made repeated pleas for the missionaries to leave quickly in order to minimize their own embarrassment and the potential political consequences. Though Paul and Silas have the upper hand, they do not demand more. Their “vindication” seems cheap compared to the public accusations, shame and suffering he and Silas endured. Paul and Silas do not sue for full justice and extend grace to allow the magistrates to save face. Like Jesus they forgive their enemies and leave in a spirit of grace and goodwill. Such grace solidifies their vindication before God and the authorities in Philippi.

Though they gladly accommodate the magistrates’ request to leave, they are not intimated. They have important business to attend to and won’t leave without first going to Lydia’s home. Like David in the Psalms, they have to pay their vows to the Lord by testifying to the newly formed congregation how he answered their prayers. Once they have completed their work, they leave Philippi and are heading west on the Via Egnatia, towards Thessalonica. Perhaps as they make their way on the Via Egnatia we can hear them singing their praise from another psalm:

Your name, O LORD, endures forever,
your renown, O LORD, throughout all ages.
For the LORD will vindicate his people
and have compassion on his servants.

(Ps 135:13–14)

1. Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 3:2490.

2. “*praying by singing praise*” – translates two verbs “to pray” and the imperfect *hymneoε* (“to sing a hymn”), implies “how” they were praying. In the Septuagint the verb *hymneoε* translates the Hebrew *hālāl* “to praise, the title of the Book of Psalms.

3. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Praise* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

4. Cassandra Sheppard, “The Neuroscience of Singing,” Uplift, December 11, 2016, <https://upliftconnect.com/neuroscience-of-singing>

5. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2494.

6. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2508.

7. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2510.

8. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 338.

9. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2514.

10. Keener, *Acts*, 3:2528-29.

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