

Christ in all of Scripture

Paul & Silas in Jail

Acts 16:16-40

Read the Passage

¹⁶Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. ¹⁷This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." ¹⁸And this she did for many days. But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And he came out that very hour. ¹⁹But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities.

²⁰And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, "These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; ²¹and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe." ²²Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. ²³And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

²⁶Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. ²⁷And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. ²⁸But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here."

²⁹Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³²Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household.

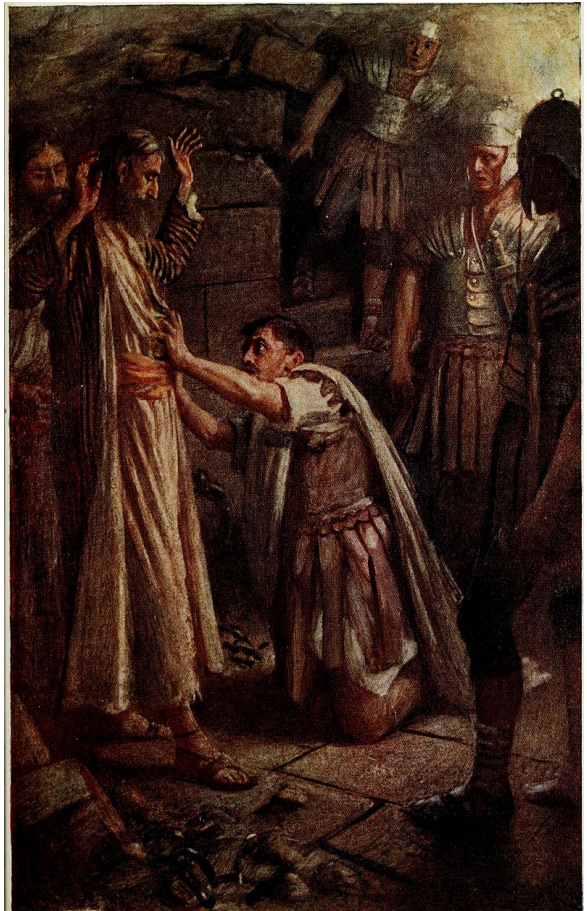
³⁵And when it was day, the magistrates sent the officers, saying, "Let those men go."

³⁶So the keeper of the prison reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Now therefore depart, and go in peace."

³⁷But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out."

³⁸And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans.

³⁹Then they came and pleaded with them and brought them out, and asked them to depart from the city. ⁴⁰So they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and depart.



Gospel Preview in the Text

The Gospel writers are aware that the Greek word “graphein” means both “to write” and “to draw.” The evangelists recognize that words can be used to draw vivid (graphic) pictures that can tell a “story within a story.” By recognizing a passage as iconic, we are alerted to a foreshowing as well as a foretelling of the gospel account of the suffering (cross) and glory (resurrection) of Jesus.

JESUS IN SUFFERING & GLORY

1. Demons testify that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus rebukes them, and drives them out (Luke 4:41).
2. Jesus is delivered over by **the multitude** to the Roman magistrate (Luke 23:1), and charged with stirring up the people (Luke 23:5).
3. The magistrate delivers Jesus over to be stripped (Luke 23:34) and beaten (Luke 23:22).
4. Jesus is crucified, his feet pinned **to the wood** of the cross (Luke 23:33) and then he is placed in a grave (Luke 23:53).
5. Jesus is raised from death on **the third** day (Luke 24:7). There was a **great earthquake**, and the tomb was opened (Luke 24:2; cf. Matt 28:2).
6. The Roman centurion, seeing all the things that happened, confessed faith (Luke 23: 47).
7. Jesus meets with the brethren and to exhort them before departing from them (Luke 24:36-53).

PAUL & SILAS IN SUFFERING & GLORY

1. A demonized girl testifies that Paul and Silas are servants of the Most High. Paul rebukes the demon and commands him to come out (Acts 16:18).
2. Paul and Silas are brought to the Roman magistrates (Acts 16:19), and charged by **the multitude** with agitating the people (Acts 16:20).
3. The magistrates deliver Paul and Silas over to be stripped and beaten (Acts 16:22).
4. Paul and Silas are thrown into a dungeon (Acts 16:23) and their feet fastened **to the wood** (stocks) (Acts 16:24).¹
5. Paul and Silas are released from their bonds at midnight (the beginning of **the third** night watch) (Acts 16:25). There is a **great earthquake** and the doors are opened (Acts 16:26).
6. The Roman jailor, seeing all the things that happened, confessed faith (Acts 16:30-31).
7. Paul and Silas meet with the brethren to exhort them before departing from them (Acts 16:40).

¹ The cross is often called “the wood” or “the tree” in Greek (See Luke’s usage in Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:39). Luke uses the same word “wood” for what is most often translated stocks. The point is that Paul and Silas are pinned to the wood, a wording that to the Greek ear would recall the “cross.”



Prophetic Narrative of the Gospel in the Text

1. Paul follows the example of Jesus in refusing to have his ministry authenticated by a demon, rather he authenticates his ministry by showing his power in Jesus' name to cast out the demon (cf. Luke 9:1).
2. Paul and Silas are charged before the Roman magistrates of inciting a riot among the multitude, much as the Lord himself had been charged before Pilate.
3. Paul and Silas, like their Lord, suffered the indignity of being publicly stripped and flogged. They might easily have escaped this punishment had they declared their Roman citizenship (cf. Acts 16:37-39). This raises the question whether they willingly chose to suffer for the name of Jesus, knowing that the Lord would honor their suffering with glory. If they willingly submitted to the Roman rod of judgment, they were like their Lord who also could have escaped his hour of suffering and yet willingly chose to suffer according to the will of God.
4. There is an iconic aspect to the scene of Paul and Silas, their backs striped and bloody from their beatings and wounds, pinioned to the wood of their stocks and so rendered immobile, and cast into the depths of the dungeon. This cruciform background makes poignant the joyous singing of these two witnesses, and their praising God before their fellow prisoners. Is it any wonder that Paul's and Silas' fellow prisoners were transfixed by their gospel witness? Ironically, even when the bonds fell off their fellow prisoners and their cell doors were opened, they themselves were rendered immobile until they understood the mystery of the gospel that transforms sorrow into joy!
5. In many of these iconic scenes there is a reference to three measures of time. Resurrection power is most manifest on the *third day*.² In the case of the Philippian jail, Luke noted that the release of Paul and Silas occurred about midnight. The notice of the specific time certainly had significance to the evangelist. It seems most likely that Luke makes the time reference in order to recall the moment that is at the beginning of the third watch of the night.
6. Paul and Silas so conduct themselves that their circumstances lead to the conversion of the Roman prison guard who had custody over them. This corresponds to the conduct of Jesus during his crucifixion, which led to the conversion of the centurion who had custody over him.
7. Paul and Silas meet with their brothers to encourage them after their suffering, just as the Lord Jesus likewise met with his disciples to encourage them after his resurrection.

² Warren Austin Gage with Leah Grace Gage, *Milestones to Emmaus: The Third Day Resurrection in the Old Testament* (St. Andrews House: Ft. Lauderdale, Fla, 2015).



Gospel Takeaways from the Text

1. The evangelist Luke tells us that Peter and John did signs and wonders and aroused the jealousy of the Sadducees, who arrested them and put them in prison (Acts 5:12-18). But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the door of the prison and they were released. The angel told them to go and stand in the temple and proclaim "The words of this Life" (Acts 5:19-20). To the consternation of the religious leaders, when they sent to the prison for the apostles, they discovered that they were not there. To their increasing frustration, the report came that the ones who had been arrested were in fact teaching the people openly in the temple!

The Sanhedrin sent and summoned them once again to come before the council, interrogating them about all that had happened and charging them with attempting to bring the bloodguilt of Jesus upon them (Acts 5:21-28). Peter and John insisted that they were obeying God and not man in what they were proclaiming publicly (Acts 5:29-32). At this word, the religious leaders gave the apostles over to be scourged and then released (Acts 5:40). Peter and John, Luke tells us, took the beating and left the council, *rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus!* (Acts 5:41).

The apostles were consistently accepting the suffering and indignity of their opposition, seeing in it a reflection of the suffering and indignity of the Savior of the world, who likewise rejoiced in his suffering! (Heb 12:2). That is the power of the gospel! All our suffering for Jesus is transformed into glory by the renewed understanding of our minds to see that God has made suffering the pathway to glory! Our suffering is the opportunity to "adorn" the proclamation of the gospel in the most powerful way possible through challenging circumstances! (cf. Tit 2:10).

2. The glory of the gospel can transform the suffering we endure for Christ, filling our hearts with joy! Paul would later write to these saints the epistle we know as Philippians. The message of that beautiful epistle is the encouragement to endure suffering with joy (Phil 4:4-7)! Who could have written such a gospel message to the Philippians with more ethical force than Paul, whose own joyful suffering in their jail had been the occasion for the salvation of the prisoners who, with the noble lady Lydia, had constituted the founding members of the church in Philippi!

The gospel is always comedic in its demonstration. The noble and wealthy lady Lydia opened her home to the household of the Roman jailor and a number of common prisoners to constitute the first church in Philippi (Acts 16:15)! Only God could have imagined such a community to further the gospel message to so strategic a Roman colony on the Egnatian highway, which led across all northern Greece and ultimately connected with the Appian highway to reach all the way to Rome itself!

