

Chapter 42: God Meant It for Good

Acts 16:25–40

After abuse at the hands of the crowd, the magistrates, those under the magistrates' orders, and the jailer himself, Paul and Silas were left in rough physical condition (Acts 16:22–24). At this point, it seems that the wicked have gained the upper hand, so that Paul and Silas face dire circumstances. Yet, in the midst of their faith-filled worship in the jail cell, the power of God acts to overturn the intentions of the wicked for the good of the Philippian jailer and his family. As Joseph later reflected, long after being raised up out of prison (Gen. 50:20), so now this story teaches that *what the wicked mean for evil, God means for good*.

The Power of God (Acts 16:25–28)

Despite the abuse that they had taken, Luke tells us that Paul and Silas were awake at midnight not to grumble and complain, but rather that they “were praying and singing hymns to God” (v. 25a). These two verbs are coordinated in such a way to express that “their singing was praying.”¹ Acting as though they were simply at church on a normal Sunday morning, they praised God in their maximum security cell, with their feet in the stocks (see Acts 16:24). “In Acts, Christians are always full of hope. Peter slept peacefully the night before his trial (12:6); Paul and Silas sang.”² Their praises caught the attention of others, so that “the prisoners were listening to them” (v. 25b).

Unlike Peter's experience in prison, when an angel had appeared to lead him alone out of the jail (Acts 12:7–11), an earthquake now shakes the foundations of the prison so that “immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened” (v. 26). In another contrast, the soldiers guarding Peter seemed to have remained asleep during Peter's escape (Acts 12:6, 10). Here, though, the Philippian jailer awakes from the earthquake (v. 27a). Upon waking, the jailer “saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped” (v. 27b). Although the prisoners' doors were opened by the earthquake, none had departed, but they were apparently shrouded by the darkness of the night and silenced by the earthquake that the jailer believed they had gone. Upon that belief, the jailer decided to take his own life, since he had been charged to “keep them safely” (Acts 16:23)—that is, upon his own life. It is at this point that Paul gave a “tremendous shout” to prevent the jailer from harming himself (v. 28).³

The Goodness of God (Acts 16:29–34)

Hearing the voice, “the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 672.

² Polhill, *Acts*, 354.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 675.

before Paul and Silas” (v. 29). It is understandable that the man should be shaken, as he had been quite close to taking his own life on the misjudgment that all his prisoners had escaped. Still, there is no outward explanation for why he should be afraid of Paul and Silas, leading him to tremble with fear and fall down before them (v. 29). Human beings cannot create earthquakes, and they clearly meant him no harm by letting him know that they were still in the jail to warn him against harming himself. Why, then, does this jailer fall down before them, trembling with fear?

The only explanation for this fear is that the jailer perceived something supernatural about the men. Polhill notes that several factors could have led him to this conclusion: “Perhaps he had heard the servant girl’s proclamation that Paul spoke of the way of salvation (v. 17). Perhaps he had heard Paul’s preaching or reports of his preaching but had not fully understood. Perhaps he had fallen asleep to the sound of Paul and Silas’s hymns to God.”⁴ The slave girl’s proclamation is especially notable, since his next question, “Sirs, what must I do to be *saved*?” is a “direct echo” of the “way of *salvation*” that she had announced about their message (Acts 16:17).⁵ Bruce summarizes, “Just what this salvation involved may not have been clear to him, but he was thoroughly shaken, in soul as well as in body, and there was something about these two men that convinced him that they were the men who could show him the way to inward release and security.”⁶

The answer that Paul and Silas (notably “they,” rather than the common “he” when Paul speaks as the leader of the group) offer is one of the clearest statements of the gospel found in the whole Bible: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (v. 31). Lenski writes, “Here we have the gospel in a nutshell, its quintessence expressed in simplest form: faith, Jesus, salvation.”⁷ They hold out nothing more than faith in Jesus, for “Christ alone hath all the parts of blessedness and eternal life included in him, which he offereth to us by the gospel; and by faith we receive them.”⁸ No works were required from this jailer, especially not that he be circumcised in order to be saved. Christ alone is the source of salvation, and we lay hold of that salvation by faith alone. Nothing more is required in order to be saved.

In v. 30, Luke told us that the jailer had “brought them out” (presumably out of the jail?), and in v. 32 we read that the missionaries “spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house” (v. 32). Although it is unclear how close his family was to the jail, the jailer brought his family to the missionaries for the missionaries to preach the gospel of Jesus to everyone living with him. While there, Luke tells us that the jailer “took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds” (v. 33a). When these missionaries had first been entrusted to his keeping, he had exacerbated their injuries by putting their feet in the stocks (v. 24). Now, he seeks to relieve their pain by washing their wounds. This action, then, is “the first work of the man’s faith. Pagan cruelty and callousness is changed into Christian mercy and tenderness.”⁹ Later, we read that “he brought them up into his house and set food before them.” Polhill writes, “He took them into his house and

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 355.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 679.

⁶ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 338.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 680.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:121–22.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 682.

fed them at his own table. They were no longer prisoners in his eyes; they were brothers in Christ.”¹⁰

Additionally, Luke tells us that “he was baptized at once, he and all his family” (v. 33b). Earlier, Paul and Silas had preached that, through faith and Jesus, he would be saved, “you and your household” (v. 31). Now, the jailer is baptized along with “*all* his family” (emphasis added). At the end of this section, we read that “he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.” Bryan Chapell makes an important observation about the specific grammar of the statement that Luke records for us:

Luke says that *all* of the jailer’s household was baptized (v. 33), but then he uses a *singular* verb to describe who rejoiced and believed in God that night (v. 34). The jailer himself believed (singular verb), and his whole house was baptized. Sadly, this important distinction in the account is not reflected in some of our modern translations (see the English Standard Version for an excellent translation). As a result, some assume that entire households were baptized in the New Testament because everyone in them believed the gospel. While this is not impossible, it is unlikely that all those households consisted only of those who were old enough to make an intelligent faith commitment. Further, **the assumption that everyone in those households must have made a faith commitment does not take notice of the careful distinction that Luke makes between those who actually believed and those who were baptized.**¹¹

Chapell’s point is incisive: the text declares that *all* the household were baptized, but emphasizes only the faith of the jailer. There is no sense that the family rebelled against his faith, and the jailer is insistent that his household hear Paul and Silas preach the gospel; however, text ties their baptized to *his* faith, not to each household member’s individual faith.

The Refuge of God (Acts 16:35–40)

After the extraordinary conversion story of the jailer, the missionaries do not attempt an escape. To do so would have forfeited the life of the jailer—that is, their brother in Christ. Yet, the magistrates seem to have lost interest in the missionaries, sending the police to let them go (v. 35). The jailer was likely pleased to deliver this message to Paul (v. 36), but Paul would not allow the magistrates to get off so easily: “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” (v. 37).

When the police returned with the information about Paul’s citizenship to the magistrates, they were “afraid” (v. 38). Polhill writes that their fear “was understandable (v. 38). Abuse of the rights of a Roman citizen was a serious offense. Magistrates could be removed from office for such; a municipality could have its rights reduced. For instance, the emperor could deprive Philippi of all the privileges of its colony status for such an offense.”¹² At this point, the magistrates must go into damage control, “so they came and apologized to them.

¹⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, 356.

¹¹ Bryan Chapell, *Why Do We Baptize Infants?* Basics of the Faith (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 18–19, **emphasis added**.

¹² Polhill, *Acts*, 357.

And they took them out and asked them to leave the city” (v. 39). As Polhill notes, “The situation was ironic. Paul and Silas had been treated as criminals but were innocent. The magistrates who condemned them now found themselves genuine lawbreakers.”¹³ Further, the magistrates had likely expected that the released prisoners would be eager to leave. With the new citizenship wrinkle, the magistrates face the dilemma of leaving these “unpopular Roman citizens” in an area where they would have a responsibility to protect them.¹⁴

So, they simply asked Paul and Silas to leave. Paul and Silas visited the church meeting in Lydia’s house and, after seeing and encouraging the brothers, they complied by departing (v. 40). Peterson writes, “The missionaries were not only responsible for founding this house-church but also for encouraging its growth and stability by their teaching and actions, not least by defending the mission in the public sphere.”¹⁵ For this reason, the general consensus among commentators is that Paul demanded this kind of an apology not for the sake of his ego, but to perhaps extend some protection to the Christians who remained in the city.¹⁶

Discussion Questions

1. At the end of the last passage, who has seemed to have the power over the fate of Paul and Silas (Acts 16:22–24)? How do Paul and Silas express their faith in the power of God, in spite of their oppressors (v. 25a)? Why do you think that Luke tells us that the other “prisoners were listening to them” (v. 25b)? What does the earthquake accomplish within the jail (v. 26)? How does the jailer respond to this event (v. 27)?
2. Why does Paul take pity on the jailer (v. 28)? What kind of fear does the jailer experience after receiving a merciful word from Paul (v. 29)? How does the question about being “saved” potentially connect back to what the demon-possessed slave girl had been saying about Paul and Silas (Acts 16:17)? What other factors might have influenced the jailer’s question? How had the Lord used the abuse against Paul and Silas to lead the jailer to saving faith?
3. What do Paul and Silas tell the jailer about how to be saved (v. 31)? What kind of power of salvation is there through believing in the Lord Jesus (v. 31a)? Why do you think they add, “you and your household” (v. 31b)? Why does the jailer bring Paul and Silas to his house (vv. 32–34)? What does he do for Paul and Silas? Who all is baptized in the jailer’s household (v. 33)? Who specifically does Luke tell us comes to faith in the household (v. 34)?
4. Why do you think that Paul makes such a big deal of the abuse that he has suffered at the hands of the magistrates (v. 37)? Why are the magistrates so frightened when they learn that Paul is, in fact, a Roman citizen (v. 38)? How did the attitude of the magistrates change toward Paul (v. 39)? Why did they still ask him to leave the city (v. 39)? Whom does Paul meet with when he goes to see Lydia (v. 40)? What does Paul’s letter to the Philippians tell us about how this church matures?

¹³ Polhill, *Acts*, 357.

¹⁴ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 341.

¹⁵ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 474.

¹⁶ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 341.