

## GOD ULTIMATELY HAS HIS WAY ACTS 16:16-40

Country singer Merle Haggard had a hit song in the eighties entitled, “*Are the Good Times Really Over?*” in which he lamented the decline of many of America’s longstanding traditions and institutions. One of the lines in that song goes like this: “I wish a Ford and Chevy would still last ten years like they should.”

If you’ll recall, the seventies and eighties were not particularly stellar years for the American automotive industry, and people finally got fed up and started buying Toyotas and Hondas instead. That’s because we value efficiency and reliability. We don’t have much tolerance for things that break down or fall apart. We want stuff to work like it’s supposed to, without any hiccups or glitches.

Because we’ve got places to go and people to see and things to do. We’ve got schedules to keep and obligations to meet, and we don’t have the time or the patience for things that disrupt or delay them.

Which is why we can get bent out of shape pretty quickly when things don’t work like we think they’re supposed to—even little things. A busted traffic light, an unexpected detour on the highway, an out-of-order ATM, a dawdling gas station attendant, an inattentive server at a restaurant—these things can be mood altering experiences for some of us.

But when *big* things happen to us—things that actually *change* our plans or even change our lives, we can be downright incredulous. Because we tend to think that such things should *not* happen, or don’t have to happen. We view them as unnecessary intrusions or unwarranted interruptions that are the result of carelessness or incompetence.

Which raises a puzzling theological question for Christians. The backbone of our theology is that God is sovereign. He has absolute authority. That means He is in control of *everything*. Nothing can happen apart from His permission. There is no such thing as luck or coincidence.

So, here’s the conundrum: If God is sovereign, why don’t things run more smoothly? Why are there so many apparent disruptions and delays and setbacks when we are serving Him? Why do so many bad things happen to God’s people that seemingly prevent us from being more productive and efficient when we are trying to do His work?

Where is God in all these things? From our perspective it seems like He may not be paying attention, or that He’s dropped the ball, or that *maybe* He’s *not* really in control.

In the story we are going to be looking at this morning there are several apparent hindrances to the proclamation of the gospel and the progress of the kingdom—hindrances that seem to give the enemies of Christ the upper hand. But as we shall see, those apparent hindrances were not the end of the story. They merely set the stage for God’s resounding victories and His glory to be revealed.

Paul and Silas and Luke and Timothy were in the Roman city of Philippi, in the province of Macedonia. They began their ministry by going to the place of prayer where Jews and God-fearers convened every Sabbath by a river just outside the city. They proclaimed the good news that Jesus was the Messiah they had been anticipating, and several responded to the message and became disciples.

But shortly thereafter they began to encounter opposition. **Verses 16-18** <sup>16</sup> *As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.* <sup>17</sup> *She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.”* <sup>18</sup> *And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.*

Here is a principle for you to remember: *Where the Spirit of God is working, the enemy is lurking.* A demon, possessing a slave girl, followed Paul and Silas wherever they went for several days. And while it appears like this demon was validating their work, calling them servants of the Most High God who are proclaiming the way of salvation, it was just another insidious tactic of the enemy to harass, antagonize, and sabotage the proclamation of the gospel. The alliance the demon seemed to want to form with the missionary team was a ruse. Its ultimate goal was to disrupt their ministry. And Paul saw through its scheme, and finally expelled it.

But that created a different kind of opposition. Look at **verses 19-21** <sup>19</sup> *But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers.* <sup>20</sup> *And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city.* <sup>21</sup> *They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.”*

The exorcism of this demon caused significant loss of income for the owners of the slave girl, which created hostility toward Paul and Silas. Fortified with racial innuendo, they leveled false charges against Paul

and Silas and declared that they were threatening the stability of the city. In so doing they succeeded in stirring up opposition in the whole city.

**Verses 22-24** <sup>22</sup> *The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods.* <sup>23</sup> *And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely.* <sup>24</sup> *Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

Given the nature of Paul and Silas' "crime," the punishment inflicted upon them by the Philippian authorities seems excessive. What's more, the magistrates' impulsiveness and lack of objectivity—the fact that they were so easily swayed by the mob and did not investigate the matter more thoroughly—was uncharacteristic of the Roman penal system. Which makes me wonder if there weren't more sinister forces behind what happened to Paul and Silas. This may have been just another of Satan's tactics to vent his hatred and rage upon servants of Christ and to sabotage the progress of the gospel.

Paul and Silas were both Roman citizens. As such they had rights, even if they were foreigners in Philippi accused of serious crimes. It was unlawful to strip a Roman citizen and shame him publicly. Roman citizens were also entitled to a trial before being punished. Yet Paul and Silas were stripped, severely flogged and thrown in prison without a trial. Furthermore, the jailer was given strict instructions not to let them escape, so he further humiliated them by fastening their feet in stocks and assigning them a maximum security "inner cell."

Which raises the question, where was God in all of this? Are not Paul and Silas *His* servants? Is not *He* the One who instructed them to go to Macedonia in the first place? Why doesn't He take better care of them? Why doesn't He exercise His authority over the forces of evil by removing or silencing the opposition to Paul and Silas so that their ministry could be more efficient, free of disruptions and distractions, and the kingdom of Christ could advance without hindrances?

The answer? Because the story isn't over yet. God had some plans and purposes that have not yet been revealed in the story—plans to demonstrate His power and grace and glory that would make these temporary setbacks and sufferings seem small.

Look at **verse 25**. <sup>25</sup> *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them...*

Wait a second! Paul and Silas had just been publicly shamed and unfairly punished. Their reputations had just been trashed, and their backsides looked like raw hamburger. They were fastened in stocks that prevented them from getting comfortable.

I could understand if verse 25 said, "About midnight Paul and Silas—tired, stiff, sore, and unable to sleep—were having their own private pity party. They were griping, groaning, complaining, moaning and crying out, 'God, what gives? What did we do to deserve this?'"

Yet we read that they were having a praise service! At midnight! In the dark... in a dungeon! They were praying and singing hymns to God! Not *about* God, but *to* God. And they were praising and thanking Him, in spite of the humiliation and pain and injustice that had been inflicted upon them.

Why? How could they possibly do that?

I would suggest that this was the result of being under the influence of the Holy Spirit and, as such, being able to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, one of which is unconditional *joy*—joy that can be experienced and expressed in any circumstance. This is the same Holy Spirit enabled joy that was exhibited by Peter and John did after they had been beaten by the Jewish Council in Jerusalem for preaching the gospel. We are told that they left "rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for the name (Acts 5:41). Paul and Silas, under the influence of the Holy Spirit just like Peter and John, were able to see their suffering and shame as the consequences of being identified with Jesus. And they loved Jesus so much and were so devoted to Him that they felt privileged to suffer on His behalf. And this produced genuine joy.

That joy, in such abysmal conditions, is so unnatural that it cannot help but be noticed by those who observe it. We read in verse 25 that all the other prisoners were listening to them sing. Eugene Peterson paraphrases it, "the other prisoners couldn't believe their ears" (*The Message*).

Why? Admittedly it is not every day that one sees two badly beaten and bloodied prisoners singing praises on their first night of lock up. But I wonder if it had more to do with their sense that something unmistakably supernatural was emanating from Paul and Silas, so much so that it was a spectacle—they couldn't help but stare or listen in disbelief and wonder if their God, the Lord Jesus Christ, was real.

If so, their curiosity was confirmed by what happened next. **Verse 26** <sup>26</sup> *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.*

Coincidence? I don't think so!

Please note: The building did not collapse. There were no casualties. The doors flew open, and the prisoners' bonds unfastened, enabling them to escape if they wanted to. But, perhaps most amazing of all, none of them did escape...or even attempted to. Which suggests to me that most likely *they* were aware that this earthquake was from God—that it was a specific response to Paul and Silas' prayers and praises, and proof that they were on holy ground.

**Verses 27-28** <sup>27</sup> *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.* <sup>28</sup> *But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."*

It was Roman law that if a guard lost a prisoner, he was to receive the same punishment that the prisoner would have received. There must have been some in the prison who were charged with capital crimes. Apparently, the jailer would have rather committed suicide than face the shame of a public execution.

But when Paul shouted for him to stop, and assured him that none had escaped, **verses 29-30**, <sup>29</sup> *And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas.* <sup>30</sup> *Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*

The jailer must have known something about the message Paul and Silas had been preaching in the city and that it was a message proclaiming the way of salvation. He was also convinced, after this incident, that Paul and Silas had the definitive answer to what was required for salvation.

But why did he feel a personal need for salvation? Was he overcome by the guilt of his own sin? Was he so impressed with the joy and integrity of Paul and Silas that he was convinced that Jesus had to be real? Was he overwhelmed with gratitude that his life had been spared, and he knew it had to be God who did it? We don't know. We don't know anything about what was going on in his heart and mind. But somehow, he recognized that the God of Paul and Silas was behind this earthquake and that this God was the one, true God who was worthy of his allegiance and devotion.

So, he asked: 'what must I do to be saved?' And Paul replied, **verse 31**, <sup>31</sup> *And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."*

That's it! Not, "believe and follow these rules..." Not, "believe and obey this list of dos and don'ts." There is nothing the jailer was required to do *except* believe in the Lord Jesus. And that goes for all of us. Because the requirements that are needed for salvation have already been met by Jesus Himself.

So, the way to appropriate God's provision for our salvation is to believe that Jesus was and is who He said He was, the Messiah, Son of the living God. Believe that Jesus was without sin, though He was tempted in every way that we are. Believe that when He died on the cross, He bore your sins in His body and experienced the punishment for your sins when His own Father diverted His wrath from us to Him and funneled that righteous wrath upon His body. Believe that His death on the cross secured the opportunity for us to be forgiven of our sins. Believe that after three days He rose from the dead, thereby defeating not only sin and Satan, but our ultimate enemy which is death itself.

Incidentally, when Paul extended the offer of salvation to the jailer's household, I don't believe he was saying that the jailer's faith would convert his entire household. I believe that Paul was offering salvation to the entire household on the same terms as he is offering to the jailer. In other words, he was saying, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, and that goes for all of you." Look at **verses 32-34** <sup>32</sup> *And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.* <sup>33</sup> *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.* <sup>34</sup> *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.*

What a great story! And if you learn anything from this story, I hope it's this: Though the enemies of Christ will do everything in their power to sabotage His work in the world, He will ultimately have His way. And He will even use those apparent setbacks, disruptions, and delays—He will even use suffering and persecution—to accomplish His purposes.

Oh yes, what Paul and Silas suffered was painful and unpleasant. Yes, their imprisonment was unlawful and unjust and seemed to be a hindrance to the progress of the gospel in Philippi. But God used that apparent defeat to win a resounding victory. Paul and Silas were used by God in that prison to escort an entire family across the threshold of the door of salvation.

Could it be that God allowed Paul and Silas to be beaten and imprisoned because He had predetermined that the jailer and his household were going to be the benefactors of His grace? I think so. Just think how close this man was to the brink of eternal torment. Had he plunged that sword into his own body and taken his life he would have spent eternity in hell, not to mention his family and servants. And yet

God snatched him (and them) from the precipice and brought them into fellowship with Himself. And who knows but that some or maybe even all of the prisoners were saved as well!

God had the last word. In the grave of apparent defeat God won a resounding victory!

What a mighty God we serve! A God who is sovereign. A God who is always in control. A God who causes all things—even bad things—to work together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. That's a promise given to us by God Himself. And it's a promise that can carry us through the most difficult circumstances of life.

If you really believed that promise—not just in your head, but in your heart, like Paul and Silas, you wouldn't complain when things don't go the way you want them to, you wouldn't worry, you wouldn't panic, you wouldn't feel sorry for yourself, you wouldn't blame God or others, and you wouldn't be so preoccupied with alleviating your pain or changing your circumstances just so you could feel better. You could rest. You could relax. You could be at peace. You could even sing songs of praise because you know that your difficult circumstances are not the end of the story. There's a happy ending, because God always wins.

The basis for real hope, real peace, and real joy is knowing that we worship and serve a God who is never surprised, who never makes mistakes, who's plans and purposes can never be thwarted, and who always works things out for good to those who love Him. We may not always understand His ways; we may not always like the things He does or allows to happen. But knowing that He is both sovereign and good does indeed inspire us to trust Him.

Look at **verses 35-40** <sup>35</sup> *But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go."* <sup>36</sup> *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."* <sup>37</sup> *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."* <sup>38</sup> *The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens.* <sup>39</sup> *So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.* <sup>40</sup> *So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.*

We don't have time to explore these verses in depth. But please understand, this is evidence of God vindicating His servants who had been falsely accused and punished, and righteousness and justice prevailing. Paul and Silas were exonerated and got to leave town with their names and reputations intact. More importantly, the name of Christ was vindicated, and He was held in high regard.

Once again, though the enemies of Christ will do everything in their power to sabotage His work in the world, He will ultimately have His way.

## **God Ultimately Has His Way**

### **Acts 16:16-40**

Main Idea: *Though the enemies of Christ will do everything in their power to sabotage the proclamation of the Gospel, He will ultimately have His way.*

#### Apparent setbacks (16-24)

Demonic opposition (16-18)

A Demon-backed Business (16)

Disrupting with the Truth (17)

Enough is Enough (18)

Public Opposition (19-21)

Retaliation for a failed business (19)

False accusation (20-21)

Antisemitic sentiments

Anti-government allegations

Government Opposition (22-24)

Severe punishment (22-23)

Taking no chances (24)

A supernatural response to adversity (25)

God demonstrates His power (26-34)

Bringing down the house (26)

An enemy becomes a friend (27-34)

On the brink of eternal torment

The gift of eternal life

God vindicates His servants (35-40)

## **Application and Discussion Questions**

### **Acts 16:16-40**

While proclaiming the gospel or serving the Lord it is not uncommon to experience intrusions, disruptions, or delays. Why?

When this happens, sometimes we are tempted to get frustrated, uptight, or angry. Sometimes we are tempted to quit. Why?

How has God enabled us (and how would God like us) to respond to the inevitable intrusions, disruptions, or delays that we encounter? What would that look like for you?

Have you ever had a hostile encounter with someone while proclaiming the gospel or serving the Lord? How should you interpret that hostility? How should you respond to that hostility?