

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Successful Ministry

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Acts 16:16-40

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 16.

We are continuing to follow the Apostle Paul on his second missionary journey and, today, we will be focusing in on his ministry in a Macedonian city called Philippi. If you were with us last Sunday, you will remember that Paul and his team came to Macedonia upon receiving a vision from the Lord. Paul had attempted to move into Asia and then into Bithynia but in each instance the Spirit closed the door.

Jesus clearly and unambiguously led Paul and his team to Philippi. Meaning: Paul is *exactly* where he is supposed to be, and Paul is doing *exactly* what he is supposed to.

AND YET, as we will see in this story, that combination does not result in *comfortable* ministry or *obvious* success. Our passage today is full of persecution and adversity. Listen: All too often in our lives the moment we face any degree of hostility or pushback we assume that we are in the wrong place. We might not say it out loud, but we often indulge the assumption that – *if* we are following God's guidance – our lives will be relatively comfortable.

Here we will follow Paul as He ministers in the place where God has *clearly* called him and as he undertakes the ministry that God has *clearly* commissioned for him. Make no mistake – Luke would have us see that this is a story of successful ministry in the city of Philippi! However, what we will discover this morning is that our 21st century, North American idea of “successful

ministry” is in need of some biblical reforming and reshaping. To that end, look with me to Acts 16. We will be reading from verse 16 to the end of the chapter. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” ¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. ²¹ They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” ²⁹ And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” ³¹ And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ 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. ³⁴ 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.

³⁵ But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, “Let those men go.” ³⁶ 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.” ³⁷ 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.” ³⁸ The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. ³⁹ So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. ⁴⁰ So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed. (Acts 16:16-40 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I want you to really consider this question: If we were living through what we just read in this text, would we describe our ministry as “successful”? Was this story a “win”? Sure – two families were baptized, but at what cost? Paul was falsely accused by a mob, beaten to a pulp, confined in an uncomfortable prison, and excommunicated from the city! Are we to call that “success”?

The New Testament answer to that question is a resounding YES!

We follow a crucified King! Sometimes I wonder if we have really wrapped our heads and our hearts around the monumental paradigm shift that Jesus has ushered in. His Kingdom is not like the kingdoms of the world. Under his rule, the first will be last and the last will be first. Under his rule, the humble will be exalted and those who exalt themselves will be laid low. In his Kingdom, DOWN is the way UP! He taught us:

Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.
(Matthew 10:39 ESV)

This is why, in Christian baptism, as the candidate goes under the water we say: “United with him [Jesus] in death,” and then, as we bring them back up, we say: “and raised with him to newness of life!” Down. And then up. United with him in suffering and death, then raised with him in life everlasting.

We want to skip the “death” part. But there is no resurrection without the cross. God’s Kingdom is like an upside-down kingdom. The moments when it looks like we’re losing are often the moments when the greatest victories are being won! Exhibit A – the cross of Christ. And the moments that we might be tempted to label as “successful” – the moments of comfort, and political power – are often the moments when we are furthest from accomplishing anything of eternal value. Which is why, in our passage this morning, we are going to be:

Redefining Success In The Upside-Down Kingdom

The first lesson that I want to draw your attention to in this passage is one that is not immediately obvious. When it comes to real “success” in God’s eyes:

1. Sometimes fame and acclaim are obstacles

In this story there is a slave girl that is possessed by a spirit of divination. She has the legitimate ability to foretell aspects of the future.

Pause here. This isn’t the main point of the story, but I want to take this opportunity to remind you that the Bible teaches that there *is* such a thing as dark, demonic power. Do not play with it. Do not visit the fortune teller. Do not sit down at the Ouija board. Do not pay to see to the travelling psychic at Rama. You are a child of the light and that is not your world. And – contrary to what you might have been told – it is a legitimately dangerous world.

That was an aside, but now back to the point I want you to see here. This girl was possessed by a demon, and she followed Paul and his team around for days shouting:

“These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” (Acts 16:17b ESV)

That declaration, in and of itself, is absolutely true. You could even argue that this demon was potentially *helping* Paul’s ministry. This fortune teller was something of a local celebrity, and to have a local celebrity following you and announcing your mission would have, in the very least, assisted with drawing a crowd.

But I want you to consider something with me for a moment: Why would this demon seemingly endorse the message of the gospel? I think it is because the devil understands that he can do far more damage to the spread of the gospel by *obscuring it from the inside* than he can by *opposing it from the outside*.

If he can dilute the church with worldly, wicked people and convince onlookers that *this* is what followers of Jesus look like, then he won’t NEED to resist our preaching. The world will simply tune us out before we even begin to speak!

I think that’s why we read in verse 18:

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. (Acts 16:18b ESV)

Paul was *greatly annoyed* by the “help” that this demon was offering. *In spite of the fact* that this local celebrity was likely drawing a crowd and *in spite of the fact* that the girl was rightly communicating the message, Paul wanted NOTHING to do with that alliance because the “success” that it was cultivating was no success at all! It was fools’ gold!

Can I tell you something? The North American church *desperately* needs to learn this lesson. We are developing a terrible habit of RUSHING TO EMBRACE anyone and everyone who will give lip service to the gospel, and it is KILLING our witness!

Listen: I don’t care which political parties people choose to align themselves with, but I *do* DEEPLY care which political leaders Christians attempt to align JESUS with. When the North American church pointed at Donald Trump and declared “He’s one of US!” we distorted and obscured the gospel for literally MILLIONS of people! Similarly, a lot of young Christian men are pointing at Jordan Peterson and proclaiming that he is one of us – in spite of the fact he has not yet surrendered his life and bowed his knee to Jesus. We are so quick to EXALT and ELEVATE and CLAIM AS OUR OWN anyone who gives a tip of the cap to the church, but we are reminded in this story that the MESSENGER MATTERS. G. Campbell Morgan argues:

The devil’s methods of opposition are those of alliance and antagonism, and the only serious one is the first. Let us beware of it. Do not let us imagine that we can take into our fellowship and enlist under one banner, men who simply affirm truth about Jesus, unless in their own lives there is an absolute loyalty to the Lord Christ.¹

Paul understood that the supposed “allegiance” of this local fortune teller was not helping the mission. It was obscuring the mission. Sometimes fame and acclaim are obstacles. That’s the first lesson we learn here. Second, we learn in this story that:

2. Sometimes pain and persecution are open doors

¹ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 387-388.

Paul not only lost a worldly "ally" when he cast out the demon, but he gained an enemy! The slave girl had long been making her owners money through her fortune telling abilities and when the demon left, so too did the earning power. The preaching of the gospel was effecting the economy.

As an aside, when the gospel really takes hold in a city, it should be felt in every sphere – including the economic sphere. How sweet would it be if the local fentanyl dealers decided to move away because their old customers were turning instead to prayer and worship? How sweet would it be if the gambling at the casino, and the sales at the cannabis shop and the liquor store all plummeted? How sweet would it be if the spread of the gospel in this city shook the foundations of the industries that profit from destroying people's lives? That's what's happening in this story.

Jumping back in now, these men went to the magistrates of the city, and they concocted a story about how Paul and his team were undermining the very values of Rome. To understand the weight of that accusation, it might be helpful to briefly consider Philippi's history. Two men named Brutus and Cassius led in the assassination of Julius Caesar and that assassination led to the battle of Philippi in 42 BC. There, Mark Antony and Octavian defeated the armies of Brutus and Cassius. They were heroes of Rome! And Philippi was the place where Rome's glory was defended! Meaning – this city was filled with patriots! Which is why, when Paul and Silas were accused of undermining Roman values, we read in verses 22-24:

The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods.²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely.²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. (Acts 16:22-24 ESV)

Try to picture them there. Paul and Silas, sitting in that dark, damp prison with their feet bound uncomfortably in stocks. Their bodies bruised and covered with open wounds. Paul, already disfigured after having been pelted with stones in Lystra now crippled once again from another merciless beating. Outside, there was a city that hated them simply for setting a possessed girl free. Ironically, the reward for that liberation was a prison cell of their own.

How would you respond, Christian? If all your comforts were stripped away, and you were hated by the world, and you were falsely accused, and mistreated, and imprisoned? How would you

respond? Knowing that it was God that called you to this assignment? Knowing that you had only done what He specifically commanded you to do? Knowing that He closed all the other doors that likely would have led you AWAY from that beating and this cell? How would you respond? In verse 25, we read:

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

I'll bet the prisoners *were* listening! How strange it must have been to hear songs of praise rising up from the bloodied men in the innermost cell. G. Campbell Morgan reminds us:

Any man can sing when the prison doors are open, and he is set free. The Christian soul sings *in* prison.²

Christian, can you sing in prison? Can you sing in pain? Can you sing when you feel yourself hated by the world and when the people that you try to help return blows for your kindness?

Paul and Silas could, and I am convinced it was because of two truths that shaped these brothers and that ought to shape each and every one of us. First, these are men who believe in the resurrection. They know how the story ends, and that knowledge changes everything! And, second, these men recognize that it is a privilege and a joy to serve Christ by sharing in his suffering. Jesus died so that we could live! What a blessing it is then to join with him in dying to ourselves as we seek to lead others out of death and into life? In Romans 8 Paul explains that we are:

heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:17b-18 ESV)

There is a famous old hymn that captures this truth so beautifully:

Nearer, my God, to thee. Nearer to thee!
Even though it be a cross that raiseth me,
Still all my song shall be,

² G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 389.

Nearer my God to Thee;
Nearer my God to Thee, nearer to Thee.³

The bars and the chains of that cell did not separate Paul and Silas from the presence of Jesus. On the contrary, as they shared in Christ's suffering, they sensed his nearness all the more!

And, as they worshipped in that prison cell, God sent an earthquake to swing the doors open and to bring about an encounter between Paul, Silas and an unnamed prison guard. In this upside-down Kingdom where the cross was the means of victory, we should not be surprised that sometimes pain and persecution are open doors. This brings us to our third lesson:

3. Sometimes you are called to suffer so that others can thrive

The doors flung open, and when the guard realized what had happened, he prepared to kill himself – we will come back to that detail later – but look with me at verse 28:

But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, **for we are all here.**” (Acts 16:28 ESV)

Why were they still there! They could have escaped! They could have been FREE!

Yet, they stayed. Because, as we have seen time and time again in Paul's life and ministry, earthly freedom was a value that did not even REGISTER in Paul's priorities. His mission – and our mission – is a mission of *spiritual freedom*, and Paul was HAPPY to sit behind bars if it meant that he could liberate his jailer.

And that's exactly what happened. Through his willingness to forego his own personal freedom, Paul positioned himself to lead that jailer and his entire family to Christ.

We're going to focus in on that story in our next and final point, but first I want to draw your attention to the last detail in our passage. The magistrates wake up the next day, and they decide

³ Sarah Flower Adams, *Nearer My God To Thee*, 1841.

that they've roughed up the out-of-towners enough to teach them a lesson. They send a messenger to release Paul and Silas, but we read in verse 37:

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." (Acts 16:37 ESV)

It's almost starting to look like Paul and Silas *don't want* to leave their cell! They didn't leave when the doors flung open and, similarly, they won't leave now that the magistrates are ushering them out. Why?

I want you to see that it is a *love* for others that animated both decisions to stay. We've already considered how their staying was a demonstration of love for the jailer and his family, but here I want you to see how their staying is a demonstration of love for the new believers that they were about to leave behind in the city.

The magistrates had broken the law when they mistreated Paul and Silas. Paul was a Roman citizen, and, under Roman law, it was illegal to beat a Roman citizen before the courts could hear his case. Paul could have simply brushed this off and went on his way, but as one commentator explains:

For Paul and Silas to have departed in this way, however, could have set a dangerous precedent for the future treatment of missionaries and also could have left the Christians in Philippi exposed to arbitrary treatment from the magistrates.⁴

So, Paul suffered mistreatment and then took the magistrate to task *so as to* set good precedent for the Christians who would remain in Philippi. The magistrates were at risk of losing their positions and potentially even being imprisoned themselves for their mistreatment of Paul, which is why we read in verse 39:

So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. (Acts 16:39 ESV)

⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 274.

This episode would have put the power brokers in the city on high alert. There likely would have been firm warnings not to mistreat the Christians again, lest the wrath of Rome fall down for what had illegally been done to Paul and Silas.

In hindsight, the beating that Paul and Silas endured and that night behind bars was a small price to pay for the salvation of the jailer and his family and the political protection of the young, fledgling church. In this upside down Kingdom where winning often looks like losing, sometimes you are called to suffer so that others can thrive. Fourth, and finally, as we seek to redefine success, we learn in this story that:

4. Sometimes your greatest loss leads to your greatest gain

We've been considering this whole story from Paul's perspective, but I want to conclude by switching to the jailer's perspective. Historically speaking, it is most likely that this jailer was a slave of the city⁵. He would have received the death penalty for allowing any prisoners to escape and – being a slave – he likely would have faced the excruciating death of crucifixion. Which is why we read in verse 27:

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. (Acts 16:27 ESV)

This was it. This was the end. This was rock bottom. Whatever hopes he had entertained of rising up out of his circumstances – any prospects of providing a better future for himself and his family – they were all *dashed to pieces* by this earthquake. The prisoners were gone. Hope was gone. All that remained for this man was public disgrace and a cross.

And yet – beautifully and ironically – it was only when this man hit rock bottom – only when he was ready to lay down his life – that he was enabled to hear the message that Paul and Silas had been proclaiming all along. It was only when this jailer was faced with the sobering reality that *he* deserved to die on a cross that he was enabled to see with the eyes of faith the King who died in his place.

⁵ See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 688-690.

In the deepest, darkest moment of his life, this man asked the most important question that a person can ever ask:

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30b ESV)

Maybe there’s someone here this morning who needs to ask that same question.

Do you know what I love about this story? It is *dripping* with grace! Remember, this is the man who dragged Paul and Silas with their bleeding and broken bodies into the deepest, darkest cell! This is the man who put their feet in stocks. At the time of the earthquake, we find him *sleeping like a baby* while Paul and Silas suffered!

But, in *his* moment of need, Paul and Silas harboured no bitterness or resentment. They were happy to sit in the cell and to forgo their own comfort and freedom so that they could tell their jailer about the hope that they had. Verse 31 reads:

And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” (Acts 16:31 ESV)

That’s it. Believe. Believe that God is Who He says He is – the holy, righteous Creator and Sustainer of all things to Whom we all owe our love and allegiance. Believe that you are who God has said you are – an image bearer of God, but a sinner who stands separated from Him and condemned. Believe that Jesus is the Son of God who was sent to take our sins to the cross and to die as our perfect substitute. Believe that his death settled our debt. Believe that Jesus rose from the grave on the third day, conquering sin and death and proving once and for all that all those who are in him will live and not die! Believe that he ascended to the Father and is right now reigning on the heavenly throne where one day every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is LORD! Believe! And you will be saved!

We go on to read:

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. ³⁴ 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. (Acts 16:33-34 ESV)

This repentant man took his new brothers in Christ, and he washed the wounds that he had callously ignored just hours ago. And after he washed them, Paul and Silas took this man and his family, and they baptized them. As they went under the water, they testified that Jesus' death was their death. As they rose, they testified that Jesus' resurrection life was their life. On the brink of being crucified by his old master, this man and his family swore their allegiance to the King who was crucified in their place.

The night that was supposed to end in a suicide ended instead in a resurrection.

Because that is what Jesus does. He is the King! His Kingdom is breaking through, and it is nothing like the kingdoms of this world. You can't work your way up to the entrance. It is only when you fall to your knees and come to an end of yourself that your eyes are opened to see the way in. Do you see him this morning? Do you hear his voice calling you home?

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6 ESV)

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” (Acts 16:31 ESV)

Let's pray.