



FOCUS VERSE

Acts 16:25

And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them.

LESSON TEXT

Acts 16:19-31

19 And when her masters saw that the hope of their gains was gone, they caught Paul and Silas, and drew them into the marketplace unto the rulers,

20 And brought them to the magistrates, saying, These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city,

21 And teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans.

22 And the multitude rose up together against them: and the magistrates rent off their clothes, and commanded to beat them.

23 And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely:

24 Who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks.

25 And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard 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 every one's bands were loosed.

27 And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled.

28 But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here.

29 Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas,

30 And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

31 And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.



FOCUS THOUGHT

Life often leads to situations we cannot control; however, we can control how we react to the situation.



CULTURE CONNECTION

Being in or out of Control

“We are not in control of what happens. Sure, we can make decisions, but regardless of what decisions we make, there will always be outside influences that affect situations” (<http://huff.to/2lnXsy1>, accessed September 2016). The truth in those words are paramount for us to understand.

Have you ever been thrust into a situation on your job that you did not see coming? Have you ever found yourself in the middle of a ministry disagreement that you played no part in? Have you ever come face to face with a relationship that was falling apart and you were at a loss to know what to do?

Regardless of the particulars, the truth is

that at some point we all find ourselves in the midst of circumstances completely out of our control. And no matter how hard we try to take control, no matter how much energy we expend trying to make things better, we are unable to fix the situation.

Life is filled with frustrations. But even when we are not in control of what is happening around us, we can be in complete control of what is happening within us. “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6–7, NKJV).

OUTLINE

- I. PAUL AND SILAS PREACHING
- II. PAUL AND SILAS IN PRISON
- III. JAILER'S CONVERSION

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

It is amazing how quickly things can happen. It is amazing how quickly situations can turn. One morning it appears all is well and the day promises no problems. Yet only hours later, devastating news can come, sending the receiver of that news into a tight spiral of turmoil and confusion.

The weather is a prime example. There are areas of the world where storms often arise seemingly out of nowhere. Stories of devastating tornados tell of clear skies at noon and black skies only hours later, bringing with them horrific winds and twisters that have completely leveled neighborhoods.

The Sea of Galilee is subject to such sudden storms. Winds funnel through the east-west aligned Galilean hill country and stir up the waters quickly. The more violent

winds come off the hills of the Golan Heights to the east. Trapped in the basin, the winds can be deadly. For example, a storm in March of 1992 sent waves ten feet high crashing into downtown Tiberias, causing significant damage (www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2009/03/Jesus-and-the-Sea-of-Galilee.aspx#Article).

Life often leads to situations that are out of our control. We have all been there. We have all felt the fear and sat stunned, wondering what happened. But what do we do when times like those come to us?

On April 28, 1979, Captain Jimmy Wilkerson was maneuvering the tugboat *Cahaba* down the Tombingbee River in southwest Alabama. The Captain—who was pushing four barges—was in the process of dropping two of the four, intending to catch them again at the other side of the bridge, after he had safely passed through the lift span.

However, chaos quickly ensued as Captain Wilkerson underestimated the speed of the current and got too close to the bridge. Scrambling to correct his direction, he put his 1800 horsepower twin engines into reverse to

get away. But when the boat moved slightly off line, the current swung the boat sideways and slammed it into the bridge.

The current was so strong that it forced the boat down under the water. To the astonishment of onlookers it passed under the bridge—disappearing for a brief moment—and popped up, upright, with the engines still going and the pilot at the wheel, on the other side.

Why did it come back to the surface in an upright position? Because it was ballasted with a forty-inch-thick lining of cement on the bottom of the hull. It is a vivid reminder that life can often go horribly wrong, and things can quickly get out of our control. It is in those moments we must cling to our faith in Jesus Christ, and trust He has the power to set us upright once again.

The idea of being “upright” should be our response when things are out of control. Though it is difficult to face the chaos with a smile, we must seek to view our troubles through the lens of eternity and the hope we have received through Jesus Christ. When our faith has been anchored to the hope He gives, we are destined to return to an upright position.

We cannot be defeated because the Lord has already won the victory for us. However, it is staying anchored to that hope, fastened to that victory, and trusting in His care that will cause us to re-surface and once again enjoy the current as it carries us to our God-given destiny.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Just as Captain Wilkerson witnessed a miracle on the river that day, Acts 16 tells us of a miraculous midnight intervention on behalf of Paul and Silas. Though this miracle at midnight involved Paul and Silas, if circumstances had been a little different, it could just as well have been Paul and Barnabas.

After all it was Barnabas who had traveled with Paul on his first missionary journey. It was Barnabas who vouched for Paul when the disciples at Jerusalem feared the newly converted Paul and thought his claim to be a believer was not true (Acts 9:26–27). Barnabas “was a good man, and full of the Holy

Ghost and of faith” (Acts 11:24). Many people came to know the Lord under his ministry (Acts 11:19–24).

For a year, Barnabas and Paul ministered together in Antioch, resulting in the label “Christians” first being applied to the disciples (Acts 11:25–27). The two not only taught together, but they were also involved in a ministry of relief to believers during a time of great famine (Acts 11:28–30).

When they returned to Antioch from Jerusalem, where they had shared in the relief ministry, Barnabas and Paul brought with them John Mark, whose mother, Mary, held prayer meetings in her home. (See Acts 12:12, 25.)

The relationship between Barnabas and Paul was due not merely to compatible personalities or shared interests. When the prophets and teachers in Antioch fasted and prayed, the Holy Spirit said, “Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them” (Acts 13:2). These men were “sent forth by the Holy Ghost” (Acts 13:4), and they left Antioch on a missionary journey, preaching in Jewish synagogues.

John assisted them for a time. Before the missionary trip was finished, however, John left Barnabas and Paul and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Although Barnabas and Paul continued to minister together, John’s departure was the incident that eventually led to a major fracture in the relationship these two men had enjoyed in gospel work. (See Acts 13:43, 46.) They shared not only in spiritual victories but also in persecution (Acts 13:48–52; 14:1–7).

During this missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas prayed and fasted together as they appointed elders in the new churches they had founded (Acts 14:23). These two men who had been sent out by the Holy Spirit returned to their home base of Antioch, where they reported what God had done in their mutual ministry (Acts 14:26–28).

After Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, teachers from Judea arrived who declared it was necessary for Gentile believers to be circumcised to be saved. Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed and disputed with them because they had seen what God was doing among the uncircumcised

Gentiles. The church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas, along with others, to Jerusalem to consult with other apostles and elders about this new teaching. Their voices helped provide direction for the church at this critical time.

Paul and Barnabas were among those who were given responsibility to deliver a letter to the believers in Antioch explaining this decision. Among those who delivered this letter was Silas, a prophet, who decided, along with Paul, Barnabas, and others, to stay in Antioch for a while. (See Acts 15:22–35.)

After they had been back in Antioch for some time, Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do” (Acts 15:36). Barnabas was willing to go, but he was determined to take John Mark with them, the same person who did not complete their first missionary journey. Paul rejected this idea.

“And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; and Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches” (Acts 15:39–41).

Had it not been for the parting of their ways, perhaps this miracle at midnight would have been the story of Paul and Barnabas rather than Paul and Silas.

I. PAUL AND SILAS PREACHING

After arriving in Philippi, a leading city in that area of Macedonia, Paul, Silas, and the rest of their ministry team went on the Sabbath to a riverside where people customarily prayed. There they met some women, including Lydia, a seller of purple. The Lord opened her heart to Paul’s words, and she and her household were baptized. After this, Paul accepted her invitation for him and his party to stay in her home (Acts 16:11–15, 40). Paul was at last back to what he had been called

to do, and his work was bearing fruit. (See Acts 9:15–16; Romans 15:18–20; I Corinthians 3:6; Galatians 2:7–9.)

As they went to prayer one day, a slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met Paul and his team. This slave girl told fortunes, bringing her masters substantial profit. Following Paul and those who ministered with him, she cried out, “These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17).

The slave girl did not make this proclamation only once. She continued to do this for many days, annoying Paul. Even though what she said was true, Paul recognized she was possessed with an evil spirit. One day, he turned and said to the spirit, “I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her” (Acts 16:18). The spirit came out of her right away.

Frustrated that she could no longer turn a profit for them by telling fortunes, the girl’s owners grabbed Paul and Silas, dragging them before the authorities and saying, “These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city, and teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans” (Acts 16:20–21).

This accusation turned the people against Paul and Silas. After having their clothing ripped off and being beaten repeatedly with rods, Paul and Silas were thrown into the most secure part of the prison with their feet fastened in stocks. (See Acts 16:22–24.)

II. PAUL AND SILAS IN PRISON

Paul perhaps was puzzled by this turn of events. Freeing the young girl from spiritual bondage was a good thing. And yet he and Silas were cast into prison for this good deed. It appeared that no matter what Paul did—even while trying to do the will of God—things began to get out of control.

Then there was Lydia’s baptism and hospitality. True, Paul could take that as a sign God was opening doors and directing their steps. But there was also the frustration of having his ministry advertised by a slave girl possessed of an evil spirit. Even though he was successful in casting the spirit out of her, the result was imprisonment rather than acceptance by the people.

It is important to note that even when we are doing what we feel God wants us to do, things do not always go as smoothly as we hope. In fact, God does not promise we will never face difficulty. Quite the opposite is true. Jesus told His disciples, “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

He has guaranteed us peace and persecution. He has promised us both triumph and tribulation. Therefore, no matter what we face—whether it is while we are working for the Lord or going about our daily duties—we are going to find ourselves in situations that are not pleasant and are out of our control. The good news is we can trust that God will carry us through it all.

We cannot know exactly what may have gone through Paul’s mind, but we do know that whatever those thoughts may have been, he did not allow them to linger. Instead, at midnight, Paul and Silas decided to trust God. Laying aside fear and worry, these two preachers decided to react to the chaos in faith.

While locked up and knowing not what the next day would bring, they prayed and sang hymns to God. We do not know how long they sang or if their music even sounded pleasing to the other prisoners who heard them. Of course, none of that mattered. Their audience was not the prisoners anyway. They were singing praises to God and declaring their resolute hope in the one who had called them to Philippi in the first place.

In the midst of the worship service, Acts tells us, “suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one’s bands were loosed” (Acts 16:26).

III. JAILER’S CONVERSION

Waking up and seeing the open prison doors, the jailer was sure all the prisoners had fled. Knowing his own life depended on keeping the security of all the prisoners entrusted to his care, fear and despair gripped his heart. He fell into a panic and began contemplating his limited options. Realizing

this breach in security likely meant death, he decided to take matters into his own hands. He drew his sword to kill himself but stopped when Paul cried out, “Do thyself no harm: for we are all here” (Acts 16:28).

The chain of events set in motion when Paul cast the evil spirit out of the slave girl now resulted in the advancement of God’s work in Philippi. And because of Paul’s right reaction to the situation that seemed out of control, God began turning everything “upright.”

Calling for a light, the jailer sprang into the cell occupied by Paul and Silas and fell before them, trembling. Bringing them out of the prison, the jailer asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). Apparently, the jailer had heard of the repeated proclamation of the slave girl: “These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17).

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,” said Paul and Silas, “and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31). Then Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to the jailer and all his household. Without delay, the jailer washed the stripes Paul and Silas had received before being thrown in prison, and they baptized him and all his family. After being baptized, the jailer brought his former prisoners into his home, fed them, and rejoiced in the newly discovered faith he shared with his family.

After the light of day, the magistrates who had so recently ordered the humiliation, beating, and imprisonment of Paul and Silas sent word to set the prisoners free. These authorities were in for a surprise.

“The magistrates have sent to let you go,” the jailer said to Paul and Silas. “Now therefore depart, and go in peace” (Acts 16:36).

Paul responded, “They have beaten us openly uncondemned, being Romans, and have cast us into prison; and now do they thrust us out privily? nay verily; but let them come themselves and fetch us out” (Acts 16:37).

When this reached the ears of the magistrates and they realized Paul and Silas were Romans, fear struck them. What they had done violated Roman law. Citizens who had not had a hearing followed by a specific charge were not to be beaten or imprisoned.

Paul insisted on their legal rights. If he and Silas simply disappeared from town, the word on the street would be that they were troublemakers who had been justly punished. This would taint the gospel witness in Philippi.

Apparently recognizing their error and wanting to minimize the possibility of personal painful consequences, the magistrates heeded Paul's warning. They came and pleaded with Paul and Silas, asking them to leave the city. Paul and Silas did leave, but only after returning to Lydia's house to encourage the believers gathered there.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Though circumstances turned difficult and things quickly spiraled out of control in Philippi, Paul pressed on with what he believed God had called him to do. He continued to do what he could, even when doors closed that he expected to open, and even when he heard the doors of his prison cell close behind him. Had he not done so, the baptism of Lydia may never have occurred, the fortune-telling slave girl may never have been delivered from an evil spirit, and the

Philippian jailer and his household may never have heard the gospel.

Paul knew that life often leads to situations we cannot control but that he could control how he reacted to situations. Paul knew of no formula that would enable him to escape his problems, but he did know how to respond to them. He knew it was always appropriate to pray and sing praises to God. This is always more spiritually rewarding than succumbing to discouragement in the face of resistance to the gospel.

Paul knew that when facing difficult circumstances, often the best response is to continue doing what you know you have been called to do. It is crucial to keep believing what you know is right even when your mind is confused. Confusing times are no time to abandon the beliefs you have carried for so long. As Reverend Larry Booker once preached, "I made the decision when I was in my right mind." We must let our commitments we have made to God carry us when things seem out of control.

The boat will re-surface upright if we continue to hold on. The current will not be what destroys us if we will sing praises at midnight. ■

REFLECTIONS

- In the New Testament, are miracles ever seen as rewards for human perfection?
- Did Paul and Barnabas experience miracles during the time they ministered together? What are some examples? What does this tell us about the nature of miracles?
- Discuss what seemed to be a dearth of miracles in Paul's ministry after his departure from Barnabas and before his arrival in Philippi. Why was this so?
- What do you think about Paul's insistence on his civil rights when he was first informed that he could be released from prison?
- Why do you think Paul, Silas, and the rest of the prisoners did not leave the prison when the earthquake opened the doors and set them free?
- What is the significance of the fact that Paul baptized the Philippian jailer and his household immediately after they believed the gospel?