

Acts 16:25-34 “How God Uses Suffering to Bring People to Himself”¹**

Main Idea: There are three scenes in Acts 16:25-40. In these scenes we see three types of opportunity God sends our way. By looking at the opportunities God sent into Paul’s life, we’ll be better prepared to see them in our own lives.

- I. God gives us opportunities to wait on Him (25-28).
 - A. Surprise #1: There was singing in prison (25).
 - B. Surprise #2: There was an earthquake (26).
 - C. Surprise #3: The prisoners chose not to escape (27-28).
 - II. God gives us opportunities to witness for Him (29-34).
 - A. To be saved, it takes repentance (29-30).
 1. You must admit you are lost.
 2. You must be willing to change.
 - B. To be saved, it takes faith (31).
 1. You must believe in Jesus.
 2. You must believe that He is the Lord.
 - C. To be saved, it takes the reception of the Word of God (32).
 - D. Once saved, there will be evidence of change (33-34).
 - III. God gives us opportunities to watch Him open up more opportunities (35-40)!
- Application: Consider two questions...
1. Are we seeing the ministry opportunities in our lives?
 2. Are we making the most of them?

Scripture Reading: Acts 16:22-34

God uses suffering. He used suffering to bring salvation. He uses suffering to make the Savior known to the world. This is how He works.

This morning we’ll be watching some people get baptized. It was a great joy to hear their testimonies of how they became Christians. At least four of their stories illustrated this theme. God used suffering to secure their salvation, namely, the suffering of Christ on the cross. But God also used suffering to make the Savior known to them. There’s something about suffering that grabs our attention.

Before we witness their baptism, I want us to see this simple truth illustrated in the Scriptures. Let’s turn to Acts 16.

Some things just don’t seem to go together. Like giving thanks for cancer. Or praising God for a job loss. Or cherishing the cross, which of course is a death instrument. And here’s another. Singing in prison. It doesn’t make sense to the on-looking world when God’s people do these things. But it does get people’s attention.

In fact, God often uses unexpected responses by His people to impact lost people with their need for a Savior. He surely did in Acts 16, as we’ll see this morning.

Opportunities to serve God come in all shapes and sizes. Sadly, we often miss them because we have our own agenda. If God put a red flag on top of the situation that said, “This is an opportunity!” we might look at situations differently. But He doesn’t do that. He calls us to walk by faith, to choose to see Him in every situation. When we begin to live with that perspective life becomes so exciting, so meaningful, because we realize that *every* situation is an opportunity tailor-made by God.

The goal is key. I won’t view the situations in my life as opportunities unless I grasp what my purpose is for being on this planet. It’s not about me. It’s about *Him*. My

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the series at WBC preached in 2003.

purpose isn't to accumulate wealth. It's not to be comfortable. It's not to gain power. It's not to retire with security at age 65. It's not even to live a long life. Rather, it's to live this life, no matter how long or short it may be, for the glory of God. My God-given mission is to glorify God by knowing Christ and making Him known to others.

Once I settle that issue I'll start seeing life as an unending string of opportunities sent my way by God. "What kind of opportunities?" you ask. "Opportunities to do what?" I want to show you the answer by taking you to the story of Paul and Silas in Acts 16.

The setting is this. These two servants of Christ are in prison. Why? All they did was set a demon-possessed slave girl free from her oppression. But her masters didn't like it, since the girl could no longer make them money by fortune-telling. So they took the missionaries to court where they misrepresented them, beat them with rods, and threw them into prison as if they were hardened criminals.

It was a terrible injustice, right? Yes. But it was also God's way of opening up an incredible opportunity, as we're about to see.

There are three scenes in Acts 16:25-40. We'll zero in on the first two as we learn how God uses suffering to bring people to Himself.

I. God gives us opportunities to wait on Him (25-28).

Waiting. A lot of the Christian life involves waiting on God. The Lord gives us light for the path, but the light comes one step at a time.

When I use the term waiting, please don't construe this to imply being passive or inactive. Waiting simply means that we do what God directed us to do until He gives us further instructions. That's what we see Paul and Silas doing as the episode begins.

Remember, God often uses the unexpected responses of His people to get the attention of the lost. What you're about to see is a very unexpected response. In fact, the first scene contains three surprises.

A. Surprise #1: There was singing in prison (25). "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them."

It's not hard to imagine why they weren't sleeping. Though it was midnight, their backs were raw from the beating the previous day. The stench of the filthy prison was undoubtedly nauseating. Their legs were in stocks, probably stretched wide apart, causing painful cramping.

What do you typically do at midnight? Most people sleep. In fact, how do most people respond when they're not sleeping in the middle of the night? Probably, not the way Paul and Silas did. They prayed and sang hymns.

How could they do that in such circumstances? They knew what we're prone to forget. The activities of praying and praising God don't depend on circumstances. Paul later wrote to the Philippian church, "Rejoice in the Lord *always* (Phil 4:4)." And he practiced what he preached. We don't rejoice in our circumstances. We rejoice *in the Lord*.

You say, "I can't do that. I don't have the strength." The fact is, no *you* can't. But if you know Christ, you can because you have the enabling of the Holy Spirit. Joy isn't something we can conjure up. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22).

Tertullian said, "The legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven."² Charles Haddon Spurgeon remarked, "Any fool can sing in the day. It is easy to sing

² F. F. Bruce, p. 337.

when we can read the notes by daylight; but the skillful singer is he who can sing when there is not a ray of light to read by...Songs in the night come only from God; they are not in the power of men."³

When God's people do what only God's people can do—praise God in the worst of circumstances—unsaved people take note. Luke says, "The other prisoners were listening to them."

Bruce Goodrich was being initiated into the cadet corps at Texas A & M University. One night, Bruce was forced to run until he dropped -- but he never got up. Bruce Goodrich died before he even entered college.

A short time after the tragedy, Bruce's father wrote this letter to the administration, faculty, student body, and the corps of cadets: "I would like to take this opportunity to express the appreciation of my family for the great outpouring of concern and sympathy from Texas A & M University and the college community over the loss of our son Bruce. We were deeply touched by the tribute paid to him in the battalion. We were particularly pleased to note that his Christian witness did not go unnoticed during his brief time on campus."

Mr. Goodrich went on: "I hope it will be some comfort to know that we harbor no ill will in the matter. We know our God makes no mistakes. Bruce had an appointment with his Lord and is now secure in his celestial home. When the question is asked, 'Why did this happen?' perhaps one answer will be, 'So that many will consider where they will spend eternity.'"⁴

There's the mark of a person in whose life the Lord is real. They're not hung up on how people mistreat them. They're devoted to turning the focus on God even when they're mistreated, in fact, *especially* when they're mistreated.

It's true. It's doing the unexpected that really gets people's attention. Invite a friend over for supper, no big deal. Even pagans do that. But invite a juvenile delinquent to enjoy a meal with you and your family, then you'll get a response. "Why would you do that? That kid will rob you blind."

Complain about a mistake on a bill. Nothing eye-catching about that. Unregenerate people do that, too. But tell the salesperson that sold you something that he made a mistake by *undercharging* you and that you want to make it right. Now you've got somebody's attention.

Sing a hymn in church on Sunday morning. That's good, but even non-Christians can do that—and they do. Sing a praise song to Jesus in a prison cell. Now that will get people's attention.

Pray before a meal. A good thing to do, yes, but pray out loud in a room full of criminals, like Paul did, and now you've got a curious audience.

But this wasn't a canned, artificial response for Paul and Silas. Do you know why they sang and prayed in jail? It's because they sang and prayed before they got to jail. It's what they did all they time. It was the pattern of their lives.

Is that true for you? Do you sing to the Lord during any other time in the week than when you come to church? How about praying and reading the Scriptures? I urge you. Make these activities a part of your daily schedule. Have daily worship times.

³ In Wiersbe, p. 468.

⁴ [Our Daily Bread, March 22, 1994.](#)

B. Surprise #2: There was an earthquake (26). “Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody’s chains came loose.”

This was no ordinary earthquake. It shook the foundations hard enough to cause the doors to fly open, but nobody got hurt. It caused the chains to fall off, but apparently nobody was injured by falling debris from the ceilings or walls.

And notice that everybody’s chains came loose, including the non-Christian prisoners.

C. Surprise #3: The prisoners chose not to escape (27-28). “The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, ‘Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!’”

Roman law said that if a guard lost a prisoner, he himself must receive the punishment the prisoner would have received. When the jailer rushed to the prison and saw the open cell doors, he drew the natural conclusion. The prisoners were gone. That’s what prisoners do when given the chance. They escape. So he drew his sword. He was a man of duty.

But then he heard words that rattled him to the core, surprising words, unexpected words: “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

Just think what Paul could have done when he saw the jailer reach for his sword. He could have thought, “After the way that brute treated us, he deserves to die. The whole lot of city officials do! Let him go ahead and fall on his sword. It must be God’s vindication.”

But no. Paul didn’t look at people—even those who hurt him—as the enemy, but as victims of the enemy. And he sought to rescue them, not condemn them. That’s why he reached out to this jailer.

Have you been unjustly hurt by someone recently? Do you realize that God can use you to reach that person, to get his attention? How? By choosing to treat him or her the way God treated you.

You say, “I can’t do that.” No, not on your own, but God offers to enable you.

“But I don’t feel like it,” you say. Please realize that feelings have nothing to do with it. What God asks us to do is to choose to treat that person kindly, to help that person, to *love* that person.

Isn’t that what Jesus said? “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic (Luke 6:27-29).”

History shows that down through the ages this has been the most effective advertising Christians have done. When mistreated, instead of retreating or retaliating, God’s people did the unexpected. They reached out in love. And the world took note.

You say, “Are you sure about that? If we do that, won’t they conclude we are weak people?” Some might. But some will respond just like the jailer did.

So here’s the first kind of opportunity God sends our way. He gives us opportunities to *wait on Him*, to choose to see Him at work even in the hard times.

That’s one of the things that made Paul such an effective minister, as Chuck Swindoll comments, “His obedience was not conditioned on his comfort or salary package. He

didn't go over the benefits summary before launching his missions career. His goal was simple and clear: to preach Christ where He had not been named. If that meant being shackled to a Roman dungeon, and choking on his blood, so be it. Back in Troas, when he said yes to that vision, it was an unconditional yes."⁵

Too often, we forget the *unconditional* nature of our calling. Sometimes God calls on us to *wait on Him*.

II. God gives us opportunities to witness for Him (29-34).

I guarantee it. If we respond to hardship in a godly way, as Paul did, God will open up opportunities for us to witness for Him, just as He did for Paul. The question is whether we are ready to make the most of the opportunity to witness. To put it simply, do we know how to tell somebody how to be saved?

What is involved in salvation? There's perhaps you text in the Bible that answers that for us more clearly than this one. Salvation involves four, inseparable ingredients.

A. To be saved, it takes repentance (29-30). "The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'"

Bishop John Taylor Smith was honorary chaplain to Queen Victoria and the chaplain general of the British Army during World War I. He used to ask all candidates for the chaplaincy one question:

"Now, I want you to show me how you would deal with a man. We will suppose I am a soldier who has been wounded on the field of battle. I have three minutes to live and I am afraid to die, because I do not know Christ. Tell me, how may I be saved and die with the assurance that all is well?' If the applicant began to beat about the bush and talk about the true Church and ordinances and so on, the good Bishop would say, 'That will not do. I have only three minutes to live. Tell me what I must do.' And as long as Bishop Smith was Chaplain-General, unless a candidate could answer that question, he could not become a chaplain in the Army."⁶

Could you tell a dying man how to be saved? We can learn from Paul.

"What must I do to be saved?" was the jailer's question. Maybe he had heard the slave girl's announcement (verse 17) that these men are "telling you the way to be saved." Maybe he heard their attempted defense at court. Maybe he heard their singing. Regardless where he heard it, this man knew he needed what Paul and Silas had, the knowledge of how to be saved.

"What must I do to be saved?"

That's a great question, one that underscores two ingredients of true repentance.

1. *You must admit you are lost.* The fact is, everyone enters this world *lost*, separated from God by sin. But not everyone admits it. Oh, they may say the words, "Yea, I'm a sinner," but they don't grasp the implications of them. If God is holy—and He is—and my life is stained with sin—which it is, then I can't enter His presence. I am lost.

To be saved you must be willing to admit that. And this.

⁵ Chuck Swindoll, *Paul: A Man of Grace and Grit*, p. 190.

⁶ In Kent Hughes, *Acts*, p. 218.

2. *You must be willing to change.* “What must I do to be saved?” implies I don’t want to go on living this way. I’m ready to change. To be saved, there must be repentance, a willingness to leave one’s life of sin.

In Acts 20:21, Paul details the message he preached to sinners, no doubt, including this lost man in the jail. “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.”

Does a person need to clean up his life first to be saved? No. But he must, as Paul says, *turn to God in repentance*, that is, turn to God with a willingness and desire for God to transform himself life. And what makes this transformation possible? His own effort? No. “Turn to God in repentance *and have faith in our Lord Jesus.*” There’s where the power for change comes from.

Faith in the Lord Jesus. It’s Jesus that has the power to do the saving, not the sinner. And the sinner plugs into this power *by faith.*

B. To be saved, it takes faith (31). “They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.’” To be saved you must have faith. But not just any type of faith will do. Paul makes it clear you must have the right object for your faith. You must believe the following...

1. *You must believe in Jesus.* “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” That means you must accept the truth about who Jesus is and what He did. You must believe that He is who He claimed to be and that He accomplished what He said He came to accomplish.

“For the Son of man is come to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).” You must believe that He came to save *you*. “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).” You must believe that His death on the cross was a ransom payment for *you*.

In addition...

2. *You must believe that He is the Lord.* “Believe in the *Lord* Jesus and you will be saved.” You can’t serve two masters. To be saved you must surrender the controls of your life to the One to whom the Father has given all authority, the *Lord* Jesus Christ.

Now, what happens if you believe in Jesus? You will be *saved*. That’s a promise. You’re no longer lost, but *saved*.

And it’s not just for you, Mr. Jailer. It’s for you and your household. Is Paul saying that the jailer’s faith would save his wife and children? No way. Faith is personal, as the Bible makes clear. And that’s why in the very next verse Paul spoke to the others in the household, too.

Verse 32 says, “Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.” Notice this, a third ingredient of salvation...

C. To be saved, it takes the reception of the Word of God (32). Faith comes by hearing the Word about Christ (Rom 10:17). Tear-jerking stories about heaven and hell won’t cut it. Oh, you may elicit a pseudo, emotion-based decision, but true faith comes when the preacher uses the Word of God to present Christ.

By the way, here’s the evidence that the Spirit has regenerated your heart. You want to hear the Word. And you also want your family and friends to hear it, like the jailer did.

I remember once when three of my friends in High School went forward to “get saved” at a Youth event. But to get this result the speaker merely told powerful stories

that stirred emotions. Oh, he talked a little bit about Jesus and used the Bible some, but his presentation was basically, “Hell is a bad place. You don’t want to go there. Pray this prayer and you won’t have to.” They prayed it and they were saved. Or were they?

Only God knows hearts, but the Scriptures make this clear...

D. Once saved, there will be evidence of change (33-34). The day after the Youth Rally was Sunday. Only one of my three friends came to church that day, and he stopped coming after a few weeks. All three supposedly “got saved,” but they didn’t want to hear the Word. After the emotion wore off, their lives went back to business as usual.

What happened in their hearts at that Youth Rally? I don’t know. I do know this. When a person is truly saved, there will be evidence of change. What kind of evidence? This kind...

Verses 33-34 “At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.” Here we see four evidences that accompany true, Spirit-produced salvation.

1. *You will show remorse for your sin (33a).* What did the jailer do? He washed their wounds. He had a part in making those wounds, remember. He had forced their wounded bodies into those stocks. He may even have been the one who beat them, too. But now he’s taking steps to make things right. No, he can’t remove the scars, but he can soothe them.

There’s a key evidence of true salvation, a remorse for your sin that leads to a desire to make restitution. Here’s another evidence.

2. *You will want to be baptized (33b).* The text says that the jailer and his family members were baptized *immediately*. There’s no half-hearted commitment here. By being baptized you are choosing to identify publicly with Christ and His people.

Salvation is personal. Baptism makes it public. “I want the world to know that I believe in Jesus.”

Last Wednesday I was talking with some of the children who were looking at the baptistery. “Why does a person get baptized?” I asked. “So they can go to heaven?” one quickly responded. That’s what many think. “No, I said. To go to heaven a person must believe in Jesus. But getting baptized makes it public that you truly have believed in Jesus.”

Have you made it public? Perhaps you’ve put your faith in Jesus but have never taken the step of obedience you’re about to witness. I encourage you to prayerfully consider the opportunity before you to show that Jesus is all the world to you!

3. *You will want to serve (34a).* That very night the jailer brought Paul and Silas to his home and fed them a meal. He became a servant, no longer a taker but a giver. Barclay is right, “Unless a man’s Christianity makes him kind it is not real.”⁷

4. *You will exhibit joy (34b).* Verse 34 concludes, “He was filled with joy.” Why? “Because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.” It’s great to be saved. And it’s so wonderful to see God save the rest of your family. When you get saved, new things bring you joy, and it’s not money and material possessions. Those things pale when compared to the joy of knowing the Lord and seeing the Lord work in the lives of those you love.

⁷ Barclay, p. 127.

It's amazing to watch God work! But this story isn't done yet. First, God gives us opportunities to suffer and wait on Him. Then He gives us opportunities to witness for Him. After that...

III. God gives us opportunities to watch Him open up more opportunities (35-40)!

That's exactly what happened for Paul in verses 35-40, as it will for us. For Paul, the authorities ignored the injustice in verses 35-36. But Paul exposed it in verses 37-39. Why? It wasn't for personal reasons. Paul didn't live with a personal agenda. It was for the sake of Christ. Pleasing Christ was his agenda.

You say, "I don't get it. What did making these magistrates personally escort them out of prison have to do with Christ?" Think about it. If Paul and his team had just slipped out of town quietly, they would have left behind a cloud of confusion. People would have wondered, "Who were those characters? Were they really criminals? If they weren't, why aren't they still here?"

Paul did what he did not for his sake, but for the gospel's. What Paul did gave this brand new church a solid platform from which to proclaim Christ to the city.

And what a church it was. In Acts 16 we're given the salvation stories of its first three charter members. An upper class businesswoman named Lydia, a lower class slave girl, and a middle class Gentile jailer. What do these three have in common?

John Stott points out that the head of a Jewish household would utter the same prayer every morning. He would give thanks that God had not made him a Gentile, a woman, or a slave. Yet in God's amazing plan, those were the three despised categories that God chose to save in Philippi: a Gentile jailer, a slave girl, and a woman named Lydia.

This is how God works. He can save anyone, and does. And He uses suffering to do it. He used suffering to provide salvation, the suffering of His perfect Son on the cross, who died in the place of sinners, then conquered death as a victor. Then He uses the suffering of His people to make the Savior known to others.

It was through the Christ-honoring suffering of one of our sisters, Reshma, that God saved her husband and two children. When I heard their testimonies, they each made that clear. They saw Christ through the suffering of their wife and mother, just like the jailor saw Christ through the Christ-honoring suffering of Paul and Silas.

Application: Consider two questions...

1. *Are we seeing the ministry opportunities in our lives?* They come our way every day, in the grocery store, at school, in the parking lot at work, and especially, when we face hardship. But we must *see* them. God is giving us opportunities to *wait on Him* and to *witness for Him*. Are you seeing them?

2. *Are we making the most of them?* I urge you to ask God right now to help you *see* and then *make the most* of the opportunities He has for you this week.

Baptismal service to follow