

Lesson 3 | June 18, 2023

Suffering for the Gospel

Study Text: Acts 16:6–10, 16–40

Central Truth: Christians should be prepared to face hostility for the sake of the gospel.

Key Verse: Reference

Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God (KJV).

They strengthened the believers. They encouraged them to continue in the faith, reminding them that we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will see that sharing Christ may result in powerful persecution by unbelievers.
- Students will be encouraged to depend on God in times of painful treatment for their faith.
- Students will share Christ with perseverance, even in the face of opposition by those who do not know Him.

Introducing the Study

Say: When warm, moist air meets cool, dry air, the results are catastrophic—a tornado that destroys property, threatens lives, and sends many to basement shelters. In the spiritual world, when the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan meet, the results can also be violent, bringing the judgment of God upon the powers of darkness and occasionally leading to the persecution of believers.

Opening Activity—Keeping It (Too) Simple

Ask. “Just do the right thing and everything will turn out okay.” Has someone ever told you that? Did you believe him or her? Why or why not? (Allow time for discussion.) Sometimes well-meaning people try to oversimplify the difficulty you’re going through. By offering easy answers, they may gloss over the depth of your feelings and situation. They may also ignore the possibility that doing the right thing brought the difficulty into your life in the first place.

Say: Walking with God brings joy and satisfaction. It can also bring persecution from those under the devil’s control. However, God is more than able to bring His children through the challenges brought by Satan’s kingdom. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

As ambassadors for Christ, Paul and Silas were led to bypass the population centers of the Roman province of Asia and head to Europe. God gave them success in their ministry there, as one woman and her family became believers and another woman was released from a demon. However, the success of God’s kingdom meant the overthrow

of the kingdom of darkness. This brought opposition from those who profited from Satan's power—and who themselves were in bondage to Satan all along.

Part 1—Called to Preach in Philippi God Has a Plan

Acts 16:6–8

Say: Following His death and resurrection, Jesus commanded His followers to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18–19). He also promised to be with them during the entire process. The Holy Spirit is always there to guide, encourage, empower, and comfort (verse 20; Acts 1:8). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The province of Asia seemed a wise target for the gospel. Its major cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, and Sardis were centers of Gentile idol worship. In addition, the Jewish population there knew the Old Testament, which would allow Paul to use the Scriptures to share the message of the Messiah. However, Paul and Silas were “forbidden” by the Holy Spirit from extending the witness into Asia at that time; instead, they traveled through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, north of Asia (Acts 16:6, KJV). Later, the message of Christ would be delivered powerfully to Asia (Acts 19:8–12).

The Holy Spirit, here called the “Spirit of Jesus,” again guided the mission by not allowing Paul and his companions to enter the province of Bithynia (Acts 16:7, NLT). Instead, they went through the district of Mysia to the seaport of Troas (verse 8; see 2 Corinthians 2:12).

Resource Packet Item 1: The Spirit of Jesus

Hand out the information sheet and ask volunteers to read the verses aloud. Allow time to discuss the close relationship between the members of the Trinity.

The guidance given through the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts moved believers toward some actions and away from other actions. The church at Antioch was told to confirm the missionary calling of Paul and Barnabas and be ready to release them for ministry (Acts 13:2). Here, the Holy Spirit twice forbade Paul's team from moving forward in the direction they had desired to go.

Because Paul understood direction from the Holy Spirit, he changed his plan. Likewise, Christians today can be in tune with the Holy Spirit and depend on Him for guidance in day-to-day decisions regarding life and ministry.

Discuss

? When God says no, what does your reaction tell you about your faith and trust in Him?

? What are some possible reasons God forbade Paul and Silas entry into Ephesus, Smyrna, and Sardis—the cities in Asia where they wanted to go?

Paul Has a Vision

Acts 16:9–10

Say: When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost, Peter explained God’s miraculous work to those who witnessed it (Acts 2:14–21). In addition to the outward miracle of inspired speech, God worked inwardly by visions and dreams to execute His purposes. Numerous examples of visions are recorded in the Book of Acts, including those experienced by the apostle Paul (Acts 18:9–11; 23:11; see also 27:23–24). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In Acts 16:9, Paul supernaturally saw a man from Macedonia, the province of Rome in northern Greece. The man pleaded with Paul to come to Macedonia and help him and his people. He did not specify what help he wanted or needed. As carriers of the gospel of Christ, believers provide the kind of help people need the most. Nothing compares with every human being’s deep need to receive God’s forgiveness and become His child. Believers need to be ready to help meet human need whenever possible, especially when people have not yet heard the message of salvation.

Paul immediately responded to the vision (verse 10). Although he was the only one to see it, his companions joined him in concluding that God had called the entire group to go to Macedonia and preach the gospel there.

The use of *we* and *us* in verse 10 indicates that Luke, the author, was present as a companion of Paul at this point on his journey. This is the first of three passages in which it is clear that Luke accompanied the apostle (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5 through 21:18; 27:1 through 28:16). When Paul was imprisoned in Rome as recorded at the end of the Book of Acts, he included greetings from Luke in the letters he wrote (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 23–24).

Discuss

? When God meets another need—such as physical healing—how can it bring a person to accept Christ as Savior?

? Why did Paul’s companions follow the guidance God gave only to him?

Part 2—Imprisoned for Gospel Ministry

Bound by a False Spirit

Acts 16:16–18

Say: Paul and his companions found a place of prayer outside the city of Philippi and led a Gentile woman—Lydia—to faith in Christ (Acts 16:13–15). As they continued this visit to Philippi, they met a slave girl with a “spirit of divination” (verse 16, KJV) “that enabled her to tell the future (NLT). This may be translated “spirit of Python.” Python was a mythical serpent in the Greek pantheon, living in the center of the earth. It was

worshiped at the shrine in Delphi, Greece, where messages were supposedly received from the Greek god Apollos. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The word translated “met” in Acts 16:16 can also be translated “opposed.” In Luke 14:31, it is used when one king was deciding if his army could successfully “defeat” (NLT) another. It is more than a conflict of ideas or philosophies when God’s people are opposed by those still under Satan’s power (see Mark 5:2; Luke 8:27); it is a clash of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. When captives respond to the message of God’s grace in Christ, they are freed and transferred into God’s kingdom of light (Colossians 1:13–14).

The slave girl followed Paul and the others, repeatedly shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved” (Acts 16:17, NLT). Paul became “exasperated” (NLT) after several days of this. Maybe the girl made her declarations in a sarcastic tone. She may have intended to repeatedly interrupt the gospel message, generally causing a disturbance. Or an endorsement from someone involved in the occult could have brought Paul’s team into disrepute.

Jesus had also encountered an evil spirit who made true statements about Him; He quickly silenced the spirit and cast it out (Luke 4:33–37). Jesus delegated this authority to His followers also (Mark 16:15–18). Realizing this, Paul exercised authority by commanding the spirit to leave the girl, which it immediately did (Acts 16:18).

Discuss

- ? List reasons believers should maintain a consistent prayer life.
- ? When a person is motivated by an evil spirit, will it always be obvious? Explain.
- ? How may believers prepare themselves to face demonic forces?

Jailed for Bringing Release

Acts 16:19–24

Say: The reaction of the slave girl’s owners was swift and violent (Acts 16:19). They depended on her ongoing bondage as their source of profit, which was their only consideration. Having seized Paul and Silas, they dragged them into the marketplace, the center of social life in all Greek cities. There, they brought them before the magistrates, the military rulers of Imperial Rome (verse 20). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Resource Packet Item 2: Reactions to the Power of God

Distribute the worksheet and have volunteers read the verses. Ask the two questions at the bottom for class discussion.

In the eyes of Rome, Early Christians experienced the same favor as the Jews. However, this did not mean that there was no tension involved. The Jews were expelled from Rome three times—in 139 BC, AD 19, and AD 41–53—because the emperor accused them of proselytizing. The events in Philippi occurred during this time (see Acts 18:2). Perhaps the slave owner capitalized on this, drawing attention to Paul and Silas’s Jewish identity and accusing them of promoting illegal customs—in other words, proselytizing (Acts 16:21).

The slave owners succeeded in quickly creating a mob against Paul and Silas (verse 22). The city officials were swayed by their testimony and ordered those under their authority to strip Paul and Silas and beat them with wooden rods. This is one of three times Paul received this violent treatment (see 2 Corinthians 11:25). He recounts this instance specifically in 1 Thessalonians 2:2, saying they were treated “shamefully” (KJV), but it did not keep them from proclaiming the gospel in Philippi.

After this severe beating, they were turned over to the jailer, who put them in the most secure part of the jail, the “inner dungeon” (Acts 16:23–24, NLT). He also placed their feet in stocks to ensure they would not escape.

Discuss

? Name some ways people today profit from their own or someone else’s involvement with the occult.

? Many people in the world today are being persecuted for their faith in Jesus. How might you pray for people in circumstances like Paul and Silas’s?

Part 3—Freedom from Imprisonment

Set Free to Testify

Acts 16:25–34

Say: Paul told the church at Ephesus to pray always (Ephesians 6:18). In keeping with his own teaching, he and Silas prayed and sang hymns to God despite being in terrible pain from their beating (Acts 16:25). The other prisoners, accustomed to cursing and cries for mercy, heard something new and unusual—the sound of praise to God. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Resource Packet Item 3: It’s Always Time to Pray

Distribute the worksheet. Read each verse aloud and identify the occasions for prayer. Invite class members to name other times we are led to pray.

The sounds of praise gave way to the rumble of a massive earthquake, shaking the prison, opening the doors, and releasing the prisoners’ chains (verse 26).

Assuming his prisoners had escaped, the jailer prepared to kill himself (verse 27). He knew the penalty for failure on his part would likely be an agonizing death. But Paul quickly stopped him, saying, “Don’t kill yourself! We are all here!” (verse 28, NLT).

The jailer went into the inner jail where Paul and Silas were and fell to his knees. He must have recognized that the earthquake was caused by the God of Paul and Silas. This led the jailer to ask, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (verse 30, NLT). They answered, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household” (verse 31, NLT).

The apostles’ example here is one we can all follow. God used Paul and Silas’s difficult situation to bring a family to Christ. In spite of their own pain, Paul and Silas were ready and willing to share the good news of salvation. We can likewise be ready, even in painful situations, to share the gospel with those around us.

Paul and Silas took time to explain the truth about who Jesus was and what He had done, making it possible for the jailer’s household to respond in faith. The jailer washed Paul and Silas’s wounds, and then the roles were reversed as the jailer and his household were baptized in water (see Acts 2:38). The repeated references to the jailer’s household emphasize how God transformed everyone in the jailer’s family amid these dangerous circumstances (Acts 16:31–34).

Discuss

? Read Acts 12:6–11, 18–19. Why do you suppose God delivered Peter from prison quietly and delivered Paul and Silas loudly?

? How can God prepare you to share the gospel with your family or coworkers?

? Why must we emphasize water baptism for those who have accepted Jesus?

Encouraging New Believers

Acts 16:35–40

Say: The next morning the city officials had a change of heart and sent their “serjeants”—the Greek word means rod-bearers—to the jail to announce that Paul and Silas should be released (Acts 16:35, KJV). These may have been the same men who beat them, adding one more humiliation to all the others. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Paul had a surprising reaction (verses 36–37). Although they were Roman citizens, he and Silas had been beaten publicly and exposed naked and bleeding without any trial. They had been treated as guilty in front of the entire community, and Paul wanted their exoneration to be public as well. Forcing the magistrates to come and escort them out would declare their innocence.

Alarmed to hear that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, the magistrates came and fulfilled Paul’s condition (verses 38–39). Their actions against Paul and Silas could have

meant they were banned from public office or even put to death. They begged Paul and Silas to leave the city.

Upon their release, Paul and Silas went to the home of Lydia, their first convert in Philippi (verses 11–15,40). They encouraged the believers there, most likely telling them the story of God’s miracle in the Philippian jail, bringing not only release from their physical shackles but release of the jailer’s household from the power of sin. After speaking with the believers, they departed for Thessalonica.

Discuss

? What may have led the magistrates to call for Paul and Silas’s release, even before discovering their Roman citizenship?

? What testimonies from your own life could you share with other believers to encourage them?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, Paul and his team moved forward in their gospel ministry to the continent of Europe. They experienced God’s power to deliver them from evil when a slave girl was released from a demon that distracted from their ministry. Their experience took a violent turn when Paul and Silas were beaten and jailed in Philippi. Hours later, God again demonstrated His power by miraculously freeing the prisoners. God is present in moments of great victory, but He is also present when His people are beaten and imprisoned for their obedience to Him. The key is to persevere in faith, waiting for Him to bring His will to pass and make His name known in the process.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Read the biography of a minister or missionary who suffered— even to the point of death—for their witness.
- Commit to praying regularly for Christians who are suffering for their faith worldwide.
- Ask God to strengthen and prepare you for times of persecution, so you may remain steadfast in your faith and in your commitment to Christ.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Elijah Pursued by Jezebel.
1 Kings 19:1–8

Tuesday:

David Laments Being Ridiculed.
Psalm 22:1–11

Wednesday:

Jeremiah Persecuted for Prophesying.
Jeremiah 38:1–6

Thursday:

Religious Leaders Try to Kill Jesus.
John 8:48–59

Friday:

Paul's Suffering as an Apostle.
2 Corinthians 11:22–33

Saturday:

Legacy of Suffering Faithfully.
Hebrews 11:32–40