

FREEDOM BEYOND THE CHAINS
AN EXEGESIS OF ACTS 16:16-33

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Thesis Statement: *Consequently, though our flesh be bound by the imprisonment and chains of this world in the natural, we remain free in the Spirit as we walk in the freedom of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

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INTRODUCTION

There are few people that will ever find real freedom among the chains of imprisonment. When someone is imprisoned, they are held captive with an unending desperation and longing for escape. With little hope held in the glimpse of the prisoner, the concept of freedom would most certainly seem like a far-fetched idea of reality. With imprisonment being considered the consequence for breaking the law or a posing a threat to society, not many would question that the imprisoned truly deserve the imprisonment sentence imposed for how long ever that may be. No one questions the murderer who stands trial and is sentenced to death or life in prison, no one questions the one accused of grand theft when they are proven guilty, and no one questions the one who has been proven beyond reasonable doubt to have broken the law. However, everyone questions the reasons behind the imprisonment for one who stands trial that cannot be proven guilty of anything. Everyone questions the imprisonment of those who are proven innocent by the factual evidence presented in the courtroom. Assuredly, it is the innocence of the one who is not guilty that causes us to protest their guilty verdict and demand a retrial in their defense.

In light of the aforementioned, Acts 16 presents the biblical scholar and believer with a case that places two innocent men on trial as every reader is forced to call into question the validity of the trial. Paul and Silas, known for their uprightness and dedication to Christ, would soon be imprisoned for simply proclaiming the name of Jesus. Teaching and preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ presented to be a crime as the early Church suffered persecution as they claimed their identity amongst the body of believers. There was something about identifying themselves with Christ that was considered criminal behavior as it challenged the boundaries and customs of the Romans (Acts 16:20-21).

Nevertheless, those who were found defying the laws of the land and preaching Christ were found guilty. Paul and Silas were found guilty and ultimately imprisoned. Yet while they are bound by the chains of imprisonment, they find freedom in knowing that it is for freedom that Christ died to set them free (Galatians 5:1). So, though they are assigned to a trial of injustice that ultimately leads them to be imprisoned, Paul and Silas find that they are bound by the very freedom of Christ that looms about their prison cell. To prove this further, as a result of their realization, their jailer, a free man, realizes that he is indeed bound as he seeks freedom from sin in salvation by asking Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved (Acts 16:30).

An utter resemblance of the trial and death of Christ, Paul and Silas' trial penalizes and charges them for the truth of the gospel of which they have found to be the very truth that has set them free from the bondage of this world. Therefore, while imprisoned, being that they know what freedom they have yet attained, they eventually found freedom while within their chains. *Consequently, though our flesh be bound by the imprisonment and chains of this world in the natural, we remain free in the Spirit as we walk in the freedom of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

CONTEXT

Historical Context

As it pertains to the historical context of Acts, the book of Acts provides vast insight into the authorship and provenance. According to Fernando, "the external evidence available for authorship of Acts, gleaned from the writings of the church in the first few centuries, is

unanimous that the author was Luke.”¹ As the history of the book has been explored throughout the years, biblical scholars found that Luke’s contribution of writing is critical as the preponderance of evidence lends to Luke’s eye as an up close and personal witness to the life of Jesus Christ. While scholarly conclusion can be erroneous, in this case, scholarly conclusion lends itself correct as references to Luke are provided in the book of Acts. Easy to understand, Luke writes Acts with clarity for all who will ever read it. Fernando states, “Luke writes in good literary Greek, which has led to the conclusion that he must have been well educated.”² Amidst the little controversy on the authorship of Acts, Fernando states that “scholars have placed the date of [the] writing of Acts from early to mid-60s of the first century to much later in the century (some estimates go as far as the late second century).”³

Literary Context

The literary narrative of Acts at onset presents to be critical to the body of Christ as it provides foundational principles for the Church. With the spotlight on an early Church that was riddled with challenges of persecution, Acts teaches believers how to walk out their walk of faith with boldness and loyalty to Christ. According to Ajith Fernando, Acts “records the origin and growth of the Christian movement, telling us how the first believers lived out Christianity [while also] describing its message and ministry, and its life – including its triumphs and trials, the

¹ Fernando, Ajith. Acts. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Academic, 1998. Page 21. Disponível em: <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5fca2ff3-c780-3cae-9732-e92476decdb6>. Acesso em: 17 abr. 2025.

² Fernando, Ajith. Acts. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Academic, 1998. Page 22. Disponível em: <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5fca2ff3-c780-3cae-9732-e92476decdb6>. Acesso em: 17 abr. 2025.

³ Fernando, Ajith. Acts. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Academic, 1998. Page 22. Disponível em: <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5fca2ff3-c780-3cae-9732-e92476decdb6>. Acesso em: 17 abr. 2025.

passions that drove it, and the source of the power that energized it.”⁴ Therefore, the book of Acts is a priceless treasure within the body of believers as it provides the infrastructure of what a church should be, how a church should function and how a church should carry the weight of the call to share the gospel throughout the nations. In addition to providing guidance and instruction to the church as a whole, Acts also provides insight as to how a believer should carry themselves when facing the scrutiny, pain and trial of persecution from non-believers. Acts 16 brings a special perceptiveness and awareness to the believer as it helps to make relevant connection with those who are faced with the trial of their faith through the leadership exploration of Paul.

Furthermore, perhaps one of the best examples of persecution on display in the book of Acts, is when Paul and Silas are imprisoned for Paul casting a demon out of a girl (Acts 16:16-18). Paul and Silas were accused of causing trouble in the city because their customs did not fall in alignment with the customs of the Romans (Acts 16:21). As a result, Paul and Silas are beat and imprisoned. This type of persecution vividly described in Acts 16 would go on to be the very type of persecution that Christians would endure throughout a span of centuries that would ultimately continue until this very day.

In addition to the insight of persecution, Acts also provides some major themes throughout the book for the reader to capture. According to Fernando, some of the major themes are “the priority of evangelism, the power of the Holy Spirit, community life, teaching, prayer, breaking human barriers in Christ, the place of suffering, the sovereignty of God, the Jewish

⁴ Fernando, Ajith. Acts. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Academic, 1998. Page 22. Disponível em: <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5fca2ff3-c780-3cae-9732-e92476decdb6>. Acesso em: 17 abr. 2025.

reaction to the gospel and the legal status of Christianity.”⁵ It is these major themes that both strengthen and help the believer navigate their walk with Christ in the body of believers. These literary themes are just as important to the seasoned believer as they are to those who are new to the faith. When exploring the theme for Acts 16, one can only explore a theme that celebrates freedom beyond the chains as readers are led on a journey of Paul and Silas’ imprisonment. Despite Paul and Silas’ fate of being bound by chains, Paul and Silas find freedom in Christ while simultaneously helping others to do the same.

CONTENT

The Crime That Costs | Acts 16:16-21

According to Trebilco, “Luke begins his story of the arrest and imprisonment of Paul and Silas in Philippi by telling of their encounter with the slave girl and her owners.”⁶ Paul, called and anointed to teach and preach the gospel, became a man of character and identified himself as a man who was loyal to Christ. Very careful with who he allowed to accompany him on his journey, one can say that Silas was truly privileged to have walked alongside one of the greatest church leaders to have ever walked the earth. Because it is known that God was with Paul and Silas as they carried out their journeys, it would be common-knowledge that they were men of the most upright character. Therefore, if they were of the utmost upright character, then there would not have been any expectation for them to be accused of anything by anyone. However, this would not prove to be the case as Paul quickly provoked authorities with his boldness in Christ by casting out a demon in a damsel girl. Upon Paul’s demand that the demon depart from

⁵ Fernando, Ajith. **Acts**. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Academic, 1998. Page 31. Disponível em: <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5fca2ff3-c780-3cae-9732-e92476decdb6>. Acesso em: 17 abr. 2025.

⁶ Trebilco, Paul. 1889. “Paul and Silas: ‘Servants of the Most High God’ (Acts 16:16-18).” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, vol. 11, no. 36, Page 51. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=rft&AN=ATLA0000816511&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

the girl, the demon does exactly what Paul commands and it leaves the girl. Alone and now in her right mind, those who she worked for would now be disgusted at the fact that she can no longer perform her duties as she once did under the influence of the demonic spirit. Upon recognition of this, her owners turn both Paul and Silas into the authorities. (Acts 16:19) As stated by De Vos, Paul and Silas are “charged with disturbing the peace and introducing a foreign cult.”⁷ As a result, the city is thrown into an uproar for simply casting out a demon in a girl in Jesus’ Name, Paul and Silas are beaten and imprisoned. (Acts 16:19-21) Paul and Silas are quickly reminded of the cost for using the name Jesus in a land where non-believers stake their claim. There was a cost for them to associate themselves with their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. While Paul and Silas knew the cost and the high price to pay, they understood their assignment and prepared themselves to pay the costs as they continued to teach and preach in the mighty name of Jesus.

The Imprisonment of Paul and Silas | Acts 16:22-24

Accused of defying the religion of the city, Paul and Silas are beaten, taken into custody and imprisoned. According to Smith, “in general, to be taken into custody is to be subjected possibly to limited mobility and overcrowding; stifling air and stench; intense and brooding isolation; limited bedding or bedclothes, if at all; multiple privations, such as the absence of natural light, and the incessant weight and noisy clanging of chains.”⁸ Demanded to suffer the consequences, Paul and Silas suffer for a crime worthy of cause as they are held accountable for calling on the name Jesus during an exorcism in the midst of the city they were in. Though

⁷ De Vos, C. S. 1999. Finding a Charge that Fits: The Accusation against Paul and Silas at Philippi (Acts 16:19-21). *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 21(74), 54.

⁸ Smith, Abraham. 2021. “Incarceration on Trial: The Imprisonment of Paul and Silas in Acts 16.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140 (4): 797. Doi: 10.15699/jbl.1404.2021.8.

criminally charged, one might find Paul and Silas' behavior to be righteous. In an effort to ensure that the slave girl was not confusing those around them as it pertained to the gospel they were making declaration of, Paul uses spiritual authority to silence the slave girl who was threatening the truth of the gospel. Though Paul and Silas face trial and imprisonment as a result of this, they knew that God would keep them. Paul and Silas keep their eyes on Christ as they suffer persecution that they had most likely expected to endure.

Furthermore, according to Sensenig, "while incarceration is rarely part of a church mission plan, it was not uncommon for and perhaps even expected by Paul."⁹ Teaching believers what to do in the hour of persecution, Paul and Silas stand their ground and they choose to stand for what they believe in. They are not swayed. They are not shaken. They take a stand. Perhaps, it is this stand that believers truly get to see the fullness of the gospel work. It is for this gospel of truth that Paul and Silas suffer. It is for this gospel of truth that they are beaten like their Lord and Savior. It is this gospel of truth that allows them to experience freedom though they found themselves in chains. Though bound, they knew they were free in Christ. The freedom that they had experienced in their soul would soon become the same freedom that would loose the prison chains on their feet in the prison.

Broken Chains | Acts 16:25-28

Imprisoned in chains with nowhere to go, Paul and Silas choose the better thing to do. Instead of complaining about what they didn't deserve and how the trial was unfair and unjust, Paul and Silas find themselves praying and singing hymns to God. According to Chris Barbera,

⁹ Sensenig, Jennifer Davis. 2014. "Joy in the Jail: Reflections on Acts 16:25-34." *Vision (Winnipeg, Man.)* 15 (2): 36. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=rft&AN=ATLAn3771361&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

“the disciple’s unwavering worship in light of their oppression and suffering initiates God’s liberative act of opening the prison doors and offering physical freedom to those in captivity.”¹⁰

The chains had been broken. Paul and Silas choose to praise in the midst of the storm. As a result of their choice, believers are reminded that when there is nothing left to do, there is prayer and praise. Because after all, prayer and praise change things. The example they set for the church has long outlived them and their choice to praise in that moment. Paul and Silas give glory to God despite what had happened to them. Though they were in the middle of a jail cell, Paul and Silas remind believers to turn our eyes and their hearts towards God. With nothing left to say or do, Paul and Silas make a joyful noise. They sing melodies. They pray. When they could have been sleeping, they decided to pray. Consequently, their praise liberated them and the chains fell while they were yet praying and praising. Paul and Silas find freedom beyond their chains as they worship God and put their eyes on Him. This miracle not only set them free, but it also set the jailer and all the other prisoners free. As Hellerman eloquently states, “the divine vindication of the missionaries—and, by extension, of their counterintuitive but eminently Christo-ethical behavior in unnecessarily submitting to the flogging and imprisonment—continues with the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his family.”¹¹

Salvation For All | Acts 16:29-33

Witnessing a miracle, the jailer soon realizes that not all who are free are free and not all those who are bound are bound. Unbeknownst to him, the jailer was in a prison that kept him bound in a life of sin. The jailer quickly finds out that he too needs freedom beyond the chains

¹⁰ Barbera, Chris. 2007. “*Toward A Christian Prison Theology*,” Di 46.2: 128-130.

¹¹ Hellerman, Joseph H. 2010. “Vindicating God’s Servants in Philippi and in Philippians: The Influence of Paul’s Ministry in Philippi upon the Composition of Philippians 2:6-11.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20 (1): 94. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=97856f91-5747-3891-b82d-122759545e85>.

that keep him bound. The jailer seeks guidance from Paul and Silas on what he must do to be saved (Acts 16:30) and Paul and Silas liberate him with an everlasting key to freedom as they offer him salvation. As a result, the jailer accepts Christ along with his entire household. The resoluteness of Paul and Silas saved an entire household.

In the midst of what wasn't fair or just to them, they kept a right heart and attitude and God still used them in the worst situation. Trials are not always for the individual facing them, sometimes trials are for others. If Paul and Silas would not have gone through this imprisonment, the jailer and his household would have never received Christ. Paul and Silas' ability to find freedom beyond their chains is an ability that the believer must take hold of at all costs at all times. Believers must be ready to take a stand in the midst of persecution where so that they can be fruit and light to those around them for salvation is for all who will believe. When the jailer received Christ, his heart was immediately changed. According to Cantarero, "the jailer responds to the disciples' love and compassion by washing their wounds, preparing a meal and receiving the gift of baptism."¹² So while the city authorities tried to bound up the gospel, it continued to remain free and spread beyond the chains that they placed on Paul and Silas for preaching it.

APPLICATION

As the life-changing light of Paul and Silas is explored in the prison walls, it is important to remember that they took solace in the fact that they knew that they were really free and the people that bound them were really bound. What is visible to the natural eye is not all there is to see. Paul and Silas saw themselves beyond their chains because they knew who they were and they knew who they belonged to. They knew what their mission was. Further, if they knew that if

¹² Cantarero, Jonathan. 2023. "Acts 16:16-40 as a Framework for Prison Theology." *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 47 (1): 1–10. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=9d1cdc8d-e2ab-3339-9305-199faaa5dacb>.

they were penalized for walking out their loyalty and dedication to the cause of Christ, then there was nothing that could harm them or come up against them.

Even if they were beaten and imprisoned, they still knew that God would get the glory and that they would be blessed for teaching and preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, though they bound Paul and Silas, they could not bind the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel cannot be bound by time, people or resources and neither can those who believe it in its entirety. *Consequently, though our flesh be bound by the imprisonment and chains of this world in the natural, we remain free in the Spirit as we walk in the freedom of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

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