

Church 2.0

*“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)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

A Case Study In Christian Suffering

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Acts 16:16-40

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 16:16; that’s on page 925 in your pew Bibles. Today we are going to read about the abuse and mistreatment that Paul and Silas experienced in the city of Philippi. In a sermon directed to pastors and preachers John Piper, said recently:

“We must preach to prepare our people for suffering because coming to Christ means more suffering, not less. Suffering is normal, not exceptional. Suffering is certain. Most American Christians are not prepared in mind or heart to believe or experience this. Therefore the glory of God, the honor of Christ, the stability of the church, and the strength of commitment to world missions are at stake. If preaching does not help our people be satisfied in God through suffering, the church will be a weakling in an escapist world of ease, and the completion of the Great Commission, with its demand for martyrdom, will fail.”¹

For the last 200 years on this continent, we’ve been following Jesus through green pastures and beside the still waters. In the next 50 years, should the Lord tarry, it appears as though we will be following him through the valley and the shadow of death.

I wonder how many of us will fall away.

¹ <https://www.preachingtoday.com/books/art-and-craft-of-biblical-preaching/special-topics/preparing-people-to-suffer.html>

How many of us – even in this room – will be revealed as nothing more than “fair weather Christians”? I hope and pray that that number is very small and toward that end I want to do everything I can to prepare us for the experience of suffering.

Suffering is not something that should destabilize or undermine the faith of a true believer. Suffering according to Jesus, is par for the course. In Matthew 10:24-25 Jesus said:

“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. 25 It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.” (Matthew 10:24-25 ESV)

“Do you think you deserve better treatment in this world than me?”, Jesus says. “You shouldn’t expect better treatment – you should aspire to similar treatment, because all those who follow me will be abused, maligned and rejected.”

So suffering is PAR FOR THE COURSE. It should be the BASELINE expectation of the Christian. We follow the crucified Christ – so what RIGHT DO WE HAVE to expect that we will live unopposed and universally celebrated at the centre of the Public Square?

But of course, we have lived unopposed and generally celebrated at the centre of the public square for several generations now – at least here in North America - and so what should feel NORMAL actually feels STRANGE and SCARY and we find ourselves out of practice, and so this passage, that hopefully lies open before you now, is very helpful for us as it provides a CASE STUDY in how to suffer as a Christian.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 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!

As I mentioned, this episode in Acts provides a case study in Christian suffering, so let’s take a moment and identify the key features of the story.

A Case Study In Christian Suffering:

The first thing we see is that Paul and Silas were arrested for doing good.

1. They were arrested for doing good

Paul and Silas did not break any laws in this story. They were not doing anything foolish or rude or disruptive. They were going to prayer meeting. They were trying to help a little girl who was afflicted with a demon.

That's important for us to see.

None of the blessings promised in the Bible for those who suffer righteously apply to those who suffer for doing sinful things. The Apostles always distinguished between righteous suffering and regular suffering. Peter said:

But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. (1 Peter 4:15-16 ESV)

Now you might say: "What about if we get arrested for preaching in the name of Christ when the government has declared that to be illegal? In that case, we would be breaking the law – is that still righteous suffering?"

And the answer of course is YES! The Bible says that we are to obey the Magistrate UNLESS the Magistrate forbids us to do what God commands or commands us to do what God forbids. So if the government declares that it is illegal to preach in the name of Christ and you are arrested for so doing, then you are suffering righteously.

But if you are simply violating local noise ordinances or trespassing or harassing passers-by – then NO, that would not qualify.

It is very important for us to see this. I guarantee you that there will be calls for us to support this or that pastor who has been arrested for taking a bullhorn into a public library or for violating public ordinances for blaring sermons through a loudspeaker in a public park – but that is not righteous suffering. If you were at the park with your family and a Muslim Imam set up a microphone and a loudspeaker beside you and reading loudly from the Qur’an what would you do? You would call the police you would expect that Imam to be given a ticket.

Ok – well the same standard applies to us.

If you are arrested for doing the right thing the right way – well then that’s righteous suffering, but if you are arrested for doing the right thing the WRONG way, well, that’s on you.

And that’s not what see happening in this story. Paul and Silas do nothing wrong. They’re not inciting a riot. They’re not marching through a public park with a bull horn. All they are doing is PRAYING and delivering a young girl who was afflicted by a demon.

That’s the first critical element in this story – they were arrested for doing good.

The second thing we see here is that:

2. They endured abuse and mistreatment

The key word there is ENDURED.

Look again at verses 22-23:

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. (Acts 16:22-23 ESV)

They were beaten by any mob, humiliated by the Magistrates, imprisoned unjustly without any kind of trial – and yet, there is no mention whatsoever of them fighting back, no mention of them swearing or reviling their attackers; no mention of them denouncing the government.

They don't do any of that – even though, an argument could be made that they would have been perfectly justified in so doing. They had been wronged. Their rights were legitimately trampled upon. They were treated unjustly. Yes, yes, yes.

And yet they ENDURED all of that.

They ate it.

Why?

Because Jesus said:

Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. (Matthew 5:39-41 ESV)

Jesus said that!! That's in the Bible and so Christians have to take that seriously. We are not in the fight back business. We are not in the defend our rights business. We are in the 'look and smell like Jesus' business – and when Jesus was mistreated, when he was suffering injustice, he said:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34 ESV)

So that's THE BAR. That's what Jesus did and as servants we are supposed to imitate our Master.

Now, at the end of the story, Paul does make use of his legal rights as a Roman citizen to question the legality of their proceedings – and he wins a significant victory. When it is noted that he is in fact a citizen and therefore he should have received a fair trial before any punishment

or imprisonment was meted out, an apology was given and the event cleared from his record – so the Bible doesn't say that we can't make use of the law or that we can't make our appeal through the courts – but it does say that we can't use violence and we are not to return reviling for reviling. Instead, Jesus said:

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44 ESV)

That's the standard.

Ok, so they were arrested for doing good, they ENDURED abuse and mistreatment, and then thirdly:

3. They rejoiced in the midst of their trial

Look again at verse 25:

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

While this is an outstanding example of Christian suffering, it is not a unique example. We think back of course, to the story recorded in Acts 5 when the Apostles were arrested and beaten; Luke tells us that when they were released:

they left the presence of the council, **rejoicing** that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. (Acts 5:41 ESV)

This is what the disciples PRACTICED and this is what the disciples PREACHED. James, the brother of the Lord said:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2–4 ESV)

James told believers to count it all JOY when they met various trials because those trials would only make them STRONGER. So the expectation in the early church seems to have been that SUFFERING WAS GOING TO COME – but we shouldn't freak out when it happens; we shouldn't LASH OUT; we shouldn't turn on each other and we shouldn't wage war on the government. Rather we should REJOICE. We should count it all joy. After all, suffering strengthens our faith, brings us closer to the Lord and increases our eternal reward – therefore, what is there to complain about?

Paul and Silas aren't complaining in this story, they weren't rallying other prisoners to their cause, they weren't starting up political action committees – they are praying and singing hymns to God.

That's what Christians are supposed to do when they suffer in the cause of Christ.

And WHEN THEY DO THAT, they tend to make an impression on everyone around them. That's the fourth thing I want you to see here.

4. They made an impression on all those who witness their ordeal

Look again at verse 25; Luke says:

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

Yes indeed, and not just the prisoners – the jailor too was taking notice of these two men. In verses 26-28 Luke says:

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." (Acts 16:26–28 ESV)

Now, in that culture, if the prisoners escaped then the soldier or guard who was responsible for them was executed – that tends to discourage the soldiers from taking bribes. So here, the jailor assumes that an angel has come and caused the earthquake to set Paul and Silas free – maybe he had heard the story of Peter’s escape from prison in Acts 12 – so he prepares to take his own life, but Paul shouts out:

“Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” (Acts 16:28 ESV)

Have you ever wondered WHY Paul didn’t make a break for it when the earthquake opened his prison door and loosed his shackles? Why didn’t he run? He shouldn’t have been there in the first place! The government didn’t have the right to put him in prison. He was there unjustly – so when the opportunity arose for him to break free – why in the world did he choose to stay?

And the answer is that PERSONAL FREEDOM was not Paul’s ULTIMATE CONCERN. He was on a mission to save souls – and so he was more interested in the salvation of the jailor than he was in his own personal liberty.

And that made an impression on the jailor. It convinced him that Jesus was real – even before he had heard the Gospel. He was ready to convert simply on the basis of having SEEN TWO MEN who cared more about HIS SOUL than they did about their personal and political liberties.

Brothers and sisters, listen to me: this kind of focus, this kind of selflessness is going to make an impression on people in our culture. It is going to say something that will be heard and will be remembered.

Now, of course, that isn’t to say that we should do this AS OPPOSED to preaching and proclaiming the Gospel – no, no, no! We need to do both – and we see Paul and Silas DOING BOTH in this story. In verse 32 it says that Paul spoke the Word of the Lord to the jailor and his household – so there was preaching in this story – but the people had been PREPARED by the way that Paul and Silas suffered.

That's important for us to see, because what are we always saying about preaching the Gospel here in Canada? We're saying that the hearts of people in this country are so hard nowadays. It feels like we are sowing our seed upon STEEL and STONE.

What could change that?

Well, according to this story, what could change that is righteous suffering. If we absorb abuse, if we pray for those who persecute us, if we die like people who believe in the empty tomb – then maybe our patient, gracious suffering will soften the hearts of our friends and neighbours.

So – how do we do this?

We're not doing very well at this right now, but it is very early on in the game and whenever Christians aren't behaving quite the way they should, the assumption in the Bible is that there must be something they've forgotten or improperly understood. So, for example, when the Corinthians were falling out with one another and taking each other to small claims court over petty grievances Paul said:

do you not know that the saints will judge the world? (1 Corinthians 6:2 ESV)

You are going to sit on the Final Court of Appeals – you are going to participate in the final reckoning – so why would you waste all this energy trying to settle every petty squabble in the present age? It will all come out in the wash – you know that, brothers and sisters. Or at least, you are supposed to know that!!!

You see? There is a connection in the Bible between KNOWLEDGE and BEHAVIOR - so what do we need to KNOW in order to suffer like Paul and Silas?

What Do We Need To Know In Order To Suffer Like Paul And Silas?

That's the question I want to end with today – and I'll be very brief, partly because we're almost out of time, but also because I know you KNOW this stuff already, but I suspect that for us to be ready to suffer WELL we could all use a bit of a refresher.

So here it is.

To suffer like Paul and Silas:

1. We need to know that we're already dead

Paul knew that and he was always eager to remind his people of that. He said to the Romans:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4 ESV)

So to BE a Christian is to embrace the reality of your own death. That's what baptism is. It is a funeral. You are dead now. We say that when we put you under the water. We say: "United in death" – and then what do we say? "Raised again unto newness of life."

So, you're dead.

You have born again into a COMING KINGDOM but with respect to THIS PRESENT KINGDOM you are DEAD!

You can't serve Jesus effectively unless you understand that.

Paul said:

I die every day! (1 Corinthians 15:31 ESV)

So on the morning he was arrested in Philippi – Paul was already dead! That's why he didn't protest. That's why he wasn't upset. Because he was already dead! This world was not his home. His life had already been transferred to a coming Kingdom. He had only been left here so as to invite as many others as he could to join him in the life to come, but for him, this world was already finished and so he did not fight and claw to maintain his hold upon it.

Do you see that?

My friends, do you feel like you are losing your rights and privileges here in Canada? Who cares?!!! Dead people have no rights! You don't really even live here anymore – you are a citizen of a coming kingdom. If you don't wrap your head around that, then you will never be able to suffer like a Christian.

And then secondly – and lastly, if we are going to suffer like Paul and Silas then:

2. We need to know that we will stand before God at the Final Judgment

Now you say, wait a second Pastor! I know my Bible and it says in Romans 8:1:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
(Romans 8:1 ESV)

Ok. Fair enough – if you are in Christ then there is no condemnation for you. I have no problem admitting that – in fact, I have no problem celebrating that – but that doesn't mean you won't stand before God at the Final Judgment. The same Paul who said that also said this:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Corinthians 5:10 ESV)

If you are a Christian – if you are in Christ – then you won't be CONDEMNED TO HELL on Judgment Day but you will still have to give an account for what you did in the body. That's true for you, that's true for me and that was true for the Apostle Paul – and he was thinking about that. He said:

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— 13 each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. 14 If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will

receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:12-15 ESV)

So Paul says, on that Day, everyone's work is going to be evaluated – it is going to be TESTED as by fire. And everything you did that was of temporal value only is going to be burned up like hay and straw and only what is precious; only what is eternal will remain.

Are you ready for that Day?

Are you contemplating that FUTURE?

Because if you are it should change how you RESPOND to suffering and persecution in the PRESENT. Suffering and persecution for the Christian will only ADD to our happiness and joy on Judgment Day. It will only increase the reward and the responsibility we are assigned in the eternal kingdom. The Apostle Paul said that to young Timothy; he said:

“If we suffer, we shall also reign with *him*” (2 Timothy 2:12 KJV)

Therefore, as we contemplate the future here in Canada; as we see darker times approaching on the horizon, there is no reason for us to be afraid and there is certainly no reason for us to be angry. Rather, as Jesus said, we ought to:

Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:12 NKJV)

Thanks be to God!

Let's pray together.