

“All the Doors Were Opened” (Acts 16:16-40)

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Acts 16:16–24 (ESV)

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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.¹*

I’m sure we’ve all heard the saying, “When one door closes, another one opens.” Some of us have probably heard and said things like, “When God closes one door, he always opens another.” So, say you were looking for a job, and thought you had found the perfect one. You applied, you interviewed, and everything went well. Except you didn’t get the job. At first, your hopes are dashed. But then an even better job opens up, and you get that one. If you had been offered the first job, you would never have found the second. Or perhaps you had your hopes set on marrying someone, and then the relationship ended. Again, your hopes were dashed. But then, a year later, you found the ideal spouse. If you had married the first person, you would never have married the second.

I think the reverse is true as well: When God opens a door, that means another one closes. If God leads you to marry that one person, that means you can’t marry anyone else. If God leads you to faith in Jesus, that means that some doors to your old ways of living are going to be closed. Your desires will change and your behavior will change and you will find that you don’t do all the things you used to do. You may even lose certain opportunities because of your faith.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

In today's text, Acts 16:16-40, we're going to see two related episodes that show examples of doors opening and closing. First, we're going to see that when one door opens, another one closes. Then, we're going to see that when one door closes, another one opens.

Before we look at the passage, I want to remind us quickly of where we are in Acts. First of all, if you're jumping in that this point the series, Acts is the story of what happened in the first thirty years of the church, after Jesus rose from the grave and ascended into heaven. Luke, the author of the books, shows us how Christianity went from something that involved only Jews in Jerusalem to a faith that included Gentiles and spread throughout the Roman Empire.

At this point in Acts, the apostle Paul is on his second missionary journey. He has Silas and Timothy and Luke himself with him. They are now in the city of Philippi, which was in a province known as Macedonia. Philippi had the special status of Roman colony, which means it had some privileges. Citizens of a Roman colony didn't have to pay certain taxes, and their laws were modeled after the laws in Rome. The biggest advantage was Roman citizenship, which is what many people in Roman colonies had. Roman citizens were protected from certain punishments. They couldn't be crucified, for example. And they had the right to demand a trial if they got into legal trouble. So they were protected from violent punishment. All of this is important for understanding what we'll see today.

I'll also remind us that last week we saw that Paul and his colleagues went to "a place of prayer" outside of Philippi because there was no synagogue there. There was a very small Jewish population. But they did manage to convert one Gentile who worshiped the God of Israel. Her name is Lydia.

So, without further ado, let's look at the first three verses, verses 16-18:

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.

Paul and company return to the place of prayer, and as they are going there, they meet a slave girl. The ESV says she "had a spirit of divination." Literally, she had a "pythonic spirit." Don't feel bad if you don't know what it means; I just learned what it means this week. This is what the scholar David Peterson writes: "Python was originally the name of the snake or dragon that

inhabited [the Greek city of] Delphi (originally Pythia) and in Greek mythology was killed by Apollo. This snake became a symbol or representative of the underworld. Apollo was thought to be embodied in the snake and to inspire ‘pythonesses’ as his female mouthpieces.”² So, the idea is that this girl was supposed to be one of these “pythonesses” who spoke for the snake, who was an embodiment of the Greek god, Apollo.

What are we to make of that? Again, the idea is that this girl is speaking on behalf of a false god. She has made a lot of money telling people’s fortunes. Well, in the Bible, false gods are real. They’re not false in that sense. They actually exist. But they’re not the one true God, so they’re false. And behind all false gods, or idols, are demons. That’s what the Bible teaches (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:36-37; 1 Cor. 10:20). And behind demons lies Satan. It’s fitting that Satan is sometimes described as a serpent (Rev. 12:9) and that the spirit behind this fortune telling is related to a snake. The spirit that is empowering this girl to tell fortunes is ultimately satanic.

Not only that, but she is saying that Paul and his friends are “servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” Now, at first that might seem good. But look at Paul’s response. He is “greatly annoyed.” We should realize that the girl doesn’t say that Paul is a servant of Jesus or Yahweh or any specific title of the God of the Bible. Philippi wasn’t a place where the Bible was known, because very few Jewish people lived there. Most people who heard “Most High God” would think of one of the pagan gods. People who heard the slave girl might have thought that Paul and his companions were servants of Zeus. Also, what the girl says is that Paul was preaching “a way of salvation.” (There is no definite article here in the original Greek.) And while salvation is certainly a Christian concept, other religions have ideas of salvation. That was true of Greek gods. These Greek gods supposedly could save their worshipers from various physical and spiritual troubles.

What the slave girl said was true, on one level, because Paul and his friends did serve the Most High God, and they were proclaiming the message of salvation. But what she said could be misinterpreted by others, and that annoyed Paul. He didn’t want people to think he was serving Zeus or some other false god. So Paul commands the spirit to come out of her in the name of Jesus. And that’s what happens.

² David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 463n.55.

We learn from this that we need to be specific about our faith. Vague talk about God or prayer can be misinterpreted. We live among people who don't know the Bible. The mass media regularly distort the content of the Bible and the message of Christianity. We need to tell others the truth, and we need to be specific about who God is and how we relate to him.

Back to the story: When Paul exorcizes this spirit, it opens one door. The demonic spirit leaves this slave and she becomes free. We're not told that she turned away from false gods and started worshiping Jesus. We're not told she was saved in the ultimate way of being saved from her sins and from God's judgment. But she was freed from demonic oppression. Yet when that happens, another door closes. She had been making a lot of money for her owners. But when the evil spirit left, their money left, too. We read about that and how they respond in verses 19-24:

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.

There's a bit of wordplay in the Greek that we can't see so easily in English. Luke uses the same verb in verse 18 as he does in 19. In verse 18 it's translated "came out" and in verse 19 it's translated as "was gone."³ The point is that once the spirit went, so did the money. Scholar F. F. Bruce writes, "when Paul exorcized the spirit that possessed her, he exorcised their means of income."⁴ This made the girl's owners mad, so they bring Paul and Silas before the rulers of the city. And they say that these men are Jews. That much is true. But they also say that Paul and Silas are disturbing the city and advocating customs that aren't lawful "for us as Romans to accept or practice." We have no record of that, so it seems these people are lying. They are covering up what they are really angry about. They also don't realize that Paul and Silas are Roman citizens.

³ ἐξῆλθεν.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 314.

Because of this false testimony, the magistrates beat Paul and Silas with rods. In 2 Corinthians 11:25, Paul says that three times he was beaten with rods. Then they are put in prison. Their feet are put in stocks.

The door that closed was the girl's old way of life. She could no longer do fortune telling. That meant that she could no longer be her owner's meal ticket.

We're not told that this girl became a Christian, but it is true that when people become Christians, the door of salvation is swung wide. But that also means that other doors slam shut. We can't continue to live the way we did before. Sometimes, that means radical changes need to be made. And that may cause people to lose money.

What might the equivalent of this story be today? You might not know this, but the pornography industry is huge. It makes something like \$13 billion a year in America, which is more money than the major sports leagues and the television networks make combined. Imagine a very popular porn actress becomes a Christian and decides she is going to leave the porn industry. You would imagine that the producers of her films would be upset, because they might lose money. That's kind of what is happening here.

It seems that money is often one of the biggest idols that Christianity threatens. (The other one is sex.) In the book of Acts, the two times there are great problems in Gentile areas are when Christianity threatens someone's income. The other time is in chapter 19, when Paul is in the city of Ephesus and the local idol industry is threatened. The love of money often keeps people from doing the right thing, and it certainly keeps them doing the wrong thing. It's extraordinarily rare for people to do the right thing when it costs them a significant amount of money.

One rare exception is when Britain abolished slavery throughout the United Kingdom. The abolition movement in Britain was led by William Wilberforce (1759-1833), a Christian Member of Parliament. He tried for years to outlaw the slave trade. After several years of attempts, the slave trade was abolished in 1807. But slavery itself was not abolished throughout the United Kingdom. That didn't happen until 1833, when the Slavery Abolition Act was passed.⁵ That act made provisions to compensate slave owners. The British government paid these owners £20 million. In today's money, that would be \$120 billion. But even more

⁵ The practice of slavery was still legal in India until 1843.

impressive is this figure: That amount was 40 percent of the government's expenditures that year.

Why would the British government spend so much money? Because it was the right thing to do. And people in Britain came to realize it was the right thing to do because many Christians had brought the horrors of slavery to their attention. People like John Wesley, John Newton, William Cowper, and Wilberforce wrote about slavery. Wesley and Newton were pastors, but Newton had formerly been a slave owner. Cowper wrote poems. Wilberforce was a politician. They all had the same faith, and that faith led the country to act against its own economic interests. In fact, there were some Christians who had earlier been against the abolition of slavery because it would hurt the economy. But the door to slavery closed as the door of the gospel was opened.

Another door that closed was the one to Paul's freedom. Though he freed the slave girl, he himself was put in prison along with Silas. But they didn't stay there long. Though the prison door closed, it would open, and so would another door. Let's read about that in verses 25-34:

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.

When Paul and Silas are in prison, they sing. That might seem like a very odd thing to do. How can someone sing in such a situation? Sometimes you hear of stories of people who even sing while dying for their faith. The most famous example of that is Jan Hus (1372-1415). Hus was a professor and a preacher who lived in Bohemia, or what later became the Czech Republic. He

criticized the Catholic Church for its abuses and was put to death. At the stake, he supposedly sang hymns.⁶ How could someone do that?

At first, it seems like only the holiest, most saintly Christian could do that. But when you think about it some more, it makes sense to sing hymns in tough situations. When we sing about God, we are reminding ourselves of the truth. We are trying to establish in our hearts the truths we already know in our heads. In the most difficult situations, we need to remind ourselves that God is good and he can bring good things out of the bad. We need to remind ourselves that God is faithful and that he loves his children. Singing helps us do that. Singing can be a great comfort when our life seems to be falling apart. You don't need to be a super-saint to sing when you're in a bad place. You just have to know you need God.

Also, singing hymns is an act of worship. If we are only worshiping God in our prosperity, and not also during difficult times, are we really worshiping God? If we're only singing on the mountaintops, and not also in the valleys, can we really call that worship?

At any rate, while Paul and Silas sing, an earthquake occurs. The prison is shaken and all the doors are opened. Not only that, but when the doors open, all the prisoners' shackles come undone. This is clearly a miracle.

However, the jailer doesn't think this is a good thing. He's ready to kill himself. In the Roman Empire, a guard who allowed a prisoner to escape would be subject to the punishment the prisoner deserved. Perhaps the jailer thought he was going to lose his job, or even be killed. So he decides to end his own life. But Paul assures him that not one of the prisoners has left. The jailer doesn't understand this. Why would these prisoners stay? What is the meaning of this? He must have connected Paul and Silas's singing to the earthquake and their staying. He must have thought they represented some kind of god. So he asks, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

The jailer may not have been thinking about the same kind of salvation that Jews and Christians think of. He may not have been thinking about being reconciled to one true God who made the whole universe. He may not have been thinking of being resurrected some day to live with God in a new, perfect creation. He may not have been thinking about sins and atonement. But he knew he needed to be rescued. So he asks about salvation. And Paul says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." The same is true for anyone in his family.

⁶ <http://www.ccel.org/f/foxe/martyrs/fox108.htm>.

Now, Paul doesn't spell out what believing in Jesus means. But we know from the book of Acts and the rest of the Bible that believing means trusting. It means turning away from one's old life of worshiping idols and sinning and turning to the one true God. It means trusting that Jesus is who the Bible says he is and that he has done what the Bible says he has done. It means trusting that Jesus is the only way to be reconciled to God, the only way to be forgiven, and the only way to have eternal life.

The jailer must have been interested in this message because he had Paul speak "the word of the Lord" to his whole household: his family and whatever servants he may have had. The jailer must have lived close to the prison for this to happen. When the entire household heard and believed, they were baptized. It's interesting to see that the jailer washed Paul and Silas's wounds, and they washed him and his family. They were cleansed of the wounds of sin.

That is a wonderful story of God bringing about something good from what looked like a bad situation. But the story doesn't end there. Let's see what happens in verses 35-40:

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.

Notice that even though a miracle has taken place that could have freed Paul and Silas, and though the jailer comes to faith in Jesus, the jailer still does his job. He doesn't let Paul and Silas go free. And they don't try to go free. They wait in the jail overnight. The next day, they are told they can go free. Apparently the city magistrates only wanted to beat and briefly imprison these men. Paul and Silas simply could have walked out of prison and left the city. But Paul doesn't do that. He tells them that they have had an innocent Roman citizen publicly beaten and imprisoned. As a Roman citizen, Paul should have had a trial. Now, the magistrates simply want to get rid of Paul. But Paul won't have it. He says, "Let them come themselves and take us out."

This raises some questions. Why didn't Paul tell them he was a Roman citizen in the first place? Perhaps he didn't have time to explain earlier. But more likely, Paul didn't want to be seen as insisting on his rights. And he didn't want to be seen as declaring his primary allegiance

to the Roman Empire. He wanted everyone to know first that he was a citizen of the kingdom of God. He wanted people to know that Jesus, and not Caesar, is Lord. It's also possible that he didn't want Christians in Philippi to think that they needed to be Roman citizens in order to be Christians. He wanted to show the Philippians that if some of them didn't have that privileged status, they could still suffer for the faith and God would take care of them.

So why does Paul make such a big deal of his citizenship later? He probably did this for the sake of the Christians in Philippi who did have Roman citizenship. He wanted to send a signal to the city leaders that Roman citizens have certain rights. He wanted to make sure that the Christians in Philippi weren't harassed. This makes sense of what Luke tells us: Before Paul left the city, he visited Lydia and "the brothers." He wanted to encourage Christians in Philippi. Of course, later Paul would write a letter to them while he was in another prison.

Though our situation is different today, I think this speaks to the importance of religious liberty. Paul knew that he had certain liberties as a Roman citizen, and that these liberties helped advance the gospel. We have religious liberty in America and it can help advance the gospel. We're not guaranteed religious freedom in the Bible. In fact, we should expect persecution. But when persecution becomes so great that people can't meet together to worship, or people can't be educated in their faith, or people of a certain religion can't own property or get employment, then usually it's bad for the gospel. Christianity will survive such situations, but it is unlikely to thrive.

What does this passage mean for us? I think we need to learn that two things: One, when people come to faith in Jesus, when they are released from spiritual oppression, that means there will be a cost. It might not be a financial cost, though it could be. There are surely certain jobs that Christians in good conscience can't keep. But there may be other costs: Doors to promotions or relationships may close because we're Christians. Though the gate of heaven is opened through Jesus, doors on earth may close. Jesus himself said that whoever follows him must pick up his cross. That means we must be ready to die for Jesus. (See Luke 14:25-33.) The gospel says that our salvation is free, but along with salvation comes other things, including tribulation (John 16:33). That is the truth. But that shouldn't discourage us. Jesus says, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). No one can give us what Jesus does, so we should gladly follow him. But we must be honest and tell ourselves and others that it won't always be easy.

For Paul, the cost of following Jesus was facing these kinds of beatings and imprisonments. Eventually, he died for Jesus. But Paul knew something that I talked about last week: Jesus can bring good things out of bad. He can even bring life out of death.

That's the second thing we need to learn. When the door of Paul's freedom closed, God opened another door. If Paul and Silas were not put into jail, that jailer and his family wouldn't be saved. If Paul and Silas weren't put into jail and then released, Paul might not have had the opportunity to stress the importance of treating Roman citizens a certain way, even if they are Christians.

If we were thrown into jail for telling people the gospel, what would we do? How would we react? Would we sulk? Would we complain? Paul was singing hymns! He knew that God could bring good out of that situation. And God did. Do we know that?

How do we react when we are inconvenienced? When our car breaks down, do we ever think, "This might be an opportunity to tell the mechanic about Jesus"? When our health fails, do we ever think, "This may be an opportunity for God to demonstrate his strength in my weakness"? Do we think, "This may be my chance to tell the doctor, or the nurses, or my roommate in the hospital about Jesus"? We often don't look at life that way because we don't have the perspective that Paul has. We need to see that when God closes one door, another one stands open. We need to understand that God is directing our lives and we should always be on the lookout for opportunities to honor him through our actions and our attitude.

Perhaps if we respond to adversity with grace and thanksgiving, instead of complaining, people around us might notice. And when something goes wrong in their lives, they might ask us, "How did you do it? How did you go through cancer with that attitude? How did you go through the death of your family member with that kind of strength?" They may not ask, "What must I do to be saved?" But perhaps that question will come up. Are you ready to answer it? Do you look at life as a series of opportunities to demonstrate God's power and grace?

We are all going to go through difficult circumstances. In the next few years, many of us will go through difficult years of health. Many will lose spouses to death. We may face persecution because of our faith. Will we see these events as closed doors or open doors? Let's not waste the opportunities that God has given us to serve him, worship him, and declare his excellencies to people who don't yet know him.