

Power and Unity

May 14, 2023

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Acts 16:11-40

Session Outline

1. The Gospel without Prejudice (Acts 16:11-18)
2. Facing Opposition (Acts 16:19-29)
3. The Power of the Gospel (Acts 16:30-40)

Theological Theme

While ministering to the church at Philippi, Paul and Silas demonstrated how the gospel message transcends boundaries that separate and divide people. God's people are called to live in harmony and unity without regard to social, racial, ethnic, or economic differences.



Leader Guide

Power and Unity

Introduction

What do Harriet Tubman, Marie Curie, Gertrude Ederle, Amelia Earhart, Rita Moreno, and Patsy Mink have in common? They were all women who were the first to do something that made history. Many of them were also the first of their race or culture to achieve their specific position. These accomplishments include being the first woman—who happened to be black—to lead an armed military operation in the United States, the first female Nobel prize winner, the first female to swim the English Channel, the first woman to fly across the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean, and others.

Overcoming tremendous odds, situations, opposition, and societal restrictions, these women each persevered until they met their goals and eventually made history as the first woman to cross boundaries in a particular area. Another name that can be added to this list would be Lydia, who became the first convert to faith in Christ in Europe. Her conversion led to the gospel spreading even further.

- ❓ What is significant about a person doing something no one else has achieved before?
- ❓ How do new Bible study groups give opportunity for further advancement of the kingdom and get more people connected?

Session Summary


Paul and his missionary team left Asia and headed toward Europe in answer to the Macedonian call. They followed a strategic plan to plant churches in major cities so that the gospel would spread from these cities to the surrounding regions. As Paul and his team began teaching about Jesus, Lydia was led to faith along with others.

There was no prejudice or limit to whom Paul and his team shared the gospel with. After encountering a demon possessed girl who followed them and proclaimed about them to others, Paul cast the demon out of her. Opposition arose against Paul and Silas, and they were thrown

into jail. Fellow believers prayed for their release and an earthquake occurred that could have simply meant their release but instead gave opportunity for others to hear the gospel. Through every circumstance they faced, Paul and Silas continued to evangelize and lead people to faith in Christ without regard to race, color, ethnicity, or social status.


1. The Gospel Without Prejudice (Acts 16:11-18)

Paul, Silas, and their team sailed for Europe to continue their efforts to spread the gospel. As noted in Acts 16:9, Paul received in a vision a request to go to Macedonia. In responding to that call, the gospel was taken to an entirely new continent. The plan was to plant churches in major cities so that the gospel message would spread from those influential places. Philippi was the foremost city in Macedonia, and that is where this missionary journey really sprouted.

 What would be the benefit of planting churches in the larger cities first?

On the Sabbath they followed their typical practice and went to join some fellow Jews by the river for prayer. This detail is significant as the lack of a synagogue in this city points to the lower population of Jews in the area. As the group met and prayed, a woman from the city named Lydia came to faith in Jesus. Lydia is described as a seller of purple dyes and silks from Thyatira. These details signify that Lydia dealt in luxury. The dyes used for making purple were held in high regard and expensive.

Notice what happened in Lydia's life and the sequence in which these events were listed. Before Lydia was converted, we read that the Lord opened her heart to the things spoken by Paul. This is important because it this miracle is necessary for anyone to come to faith in God. A vital element of evangelism is praying for God to open the hearts of those who need Him. We should never discount the role of prayer in the work of effectively sharing the gospel.

 How have you experienced the power and importance of prayer in reaching people with the gospel?

Paul and Silas attracted attention as they taught and preached. They not only had an impact on some of the more affluent people like Lydia, but they also encountered some who were viewed as the bottom rung of society. In verses 16-17, we read that a slave girl who was possessed with a spirit of divination began following them and attempting to disrupt their interactions. Ironically, the demon-possessed testified to the truth of Paul and Silas's message as the evil spirit within her recognized the power of God at work through them.

In Philippi

Paul preached first in the city of Philippi, in the northeastern section of Macedonia. It was a Roman colony city, with a nucleus of Roman citizens, Roman government, and a major Roman highway running through it. We first learn of Paul's Roman citizenship in the course of his Philippian ministry. Luke's account falls into four main parts.

After many days of her following after them and seeking to act as a disruption, Paul had enough and commanded the spirit to leave her in the name of Jesus Christ. It is of note that the spirit immediately left her. Though demonic spirits can be strong, they are nowhere near as powerful as the Lord Jesus Christ, and in His presence, they have no choice but to flee. Paul did not make any effort to cast out the demon using his own name or power but spoke to the demon only on the authority of Jesus. The culture of that day was open to worshiping and celebrating evil spirits and false gods. Our society today has some of the same tendencies, and believers should be careful to refrain from inviting evil spirits into our lives in any way, shape, or form—even through seemingly innocent practices.



Application: How can you protect your own life from giving the enemy a foothold in these areas of your life?

2. Facing Opposition (Acts 16:19-29)

Paul and Silas made enemies by casting the demon out of the slave girl. Her masters had used her for profit and were not happy when she was freed from the evil spirit and the power it brought. In short, the girl's freedom from oppression meant financial loss for her owners. The owners brought Paul and Silas before the authorities to accuse them and seek charges against them.

Paul and Silas's act of freeing the girl from demonic oppression made a statement that the gospel is for all people no matter who they are or where they come from. They also paid a price for setting the girl free, being accused of vague charges designed to get them imprisoned. It did not take much for the crowd and the magistrates to turn against them.




The magistrates and crowd turned against Paul and Silas quickly. How do you see the world acting biased against Christians today?

They assumed Paul and Silas were Jews and not Roman citizens, which has significant implications. Roman citizens had specific, well-guarded civil rights while non-citizens had no rights and were subject to any treatment the crowd or magistrates chose to enact. After being beaten severely, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison. To ensure further security, Paul and Silas's feet were bound in stocks in the inner prison. In this situation, they had little hope for escape.

But these men of God did not give in to the temptation that might overcome many who are mistreated and beaten for their faith. Instead, they held an impromptu praise and worship service in the prison. Imagine how it affected the other prisoners to see two men, who should be moaning in pain, singing praises and being joyful. Paul and Silas are a beautiful example of the fact that joy is not based on circumstances but on a real relationship with Jesus.


The prison praise service went to another level when a supernatural earthquake occurred. The earthquake not only opened the prison doors, but it also loosened the chains bunding the prisoners. Upon realizing what had happened, the jailor in charge moved to kill himself in desperation, recognizing the punishment he would face for letting these prisoners escape. But Paul and Silas called out and stopped him in his tracks when they told him no one had escaped.

 Application: How would you have responded if you were in Paul and Silas's position when the earthquake came?

3. The Power of the Gospel (Acts 16:30-40)

The Philippian jailer was so shocked by how Paul and Silas conducted themselves that he recognized their message as the truth. He saw something very different about these men and asked for help. That Paul and Silas were more concerned for this one man's soul and salvation over their own freedom spoke volumes, and the jailer asked how he could be saved.

Seeing the evidence of God at work in people's daily lives is one of the most powerful tools of evangelism. Paul responded to the jailer with the simple truth that he needed to trust in Jesus to be saved. Paul called for the jailer to believe in Jesus, along with his whole household. Here is another reminder that the salvation of individuals always gives opportunity for influence to spread the truth to others.

 Who has God given you influence with? Neighbors, co-workers, someone with a common hobby, kids sports teams, etc? How might you share your God story with them?

The same jailer who had punished and mistreated Paul and Silas was changed completely. That he cared for their wounds and fed them gave evidence of the jailer's life change. In response to the truth of the gospel, the jailer and his family were baptized that very night. What started as an unfair beating that transitioned into a midnight worship service in chains ended with a man and his entire family being baptized into the family of God.

After ministering to the jailer's family, Paul and Silas returned to the prison so there would be no problems for their new brother in Christ. The next day, the magistrates sent word to free Paul and Silas from the prison. Though

it appeared that the earthquake could be the means of Paul and Silas's escape, the earthquake was actually meant to setting the jailer and his family free from their sins to give them new life in Christ.



Why is it important that we look for God's activity in these areas of our lives?

When word was sent for Paul and Silas to be released, Paul spoke up and revealed that they were actually Roman citizens whose rights had been violated. He asked why, as Roman citizens, they would be mistreated publicly then secretly set free. Even though they had rights, according to the systems of the day, Paul and Silas did not immediately speak up about those rights because there was a bigger plan at work. More than our rights according to people, what matters most is obeying God's plan and doing His will. Although the magistrates tried to sweep their mistake under the rug by encouraging Paul and Silas to slip out of town, Paul and Silas chose to go to Lydia's house and spend time with the believers there before leaving.



Application: What from today's passage encourages you to overcome obstacles, fears, or excuses so that you can have a conversation about Christ with them?

Conclusion

Taking in all that happened with Paul, Silas, and the church at Philippi gives us a powerful picture of the power of God at work in all circumstances. It is also a reminder that we are called to reach every person we can with the gospel. There is no room for divisions and barriers if we are going to fulfill God's call on our lives. Paul and Silas shared with the elite of society as freely as they shared with lowest of society.

They also demonstrated that it is more important to follow God's plan than to demand easier times for ourselves when they stayed imprisoned for the sake of reaching a man who had mistreated them severely. This kind of love does not come from human sources but is only found in the power of God at work in the lives of people sold out to and committed to Him. The gospel brings people from all walks of life together with a common purpose in Christ.

- ❓ Why is it important for believers to be connected and unified across racial, ethnic, and social boundaries? What are the obstacles to this kind of unity today?
- ❓ How can you be part of connecting people from different places, stations, and cultures through the gospel? How can we seek this together as a group?
- ❓ Who is God calling you to share the gospel with through conversation this week? How will you respond in obedience?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for loving all people and inviting you to be part of reaching others. Ask for racial unity and lack of division in your community. Ask for sensitivity to see how God wants to use you to build relationships with those who are not like you.

Additional Resources

- *How to Heal Our Racial Divide* by Derwin Gray
- *Acts* by Charles Swindoll
- *Be Daring* by Warren Wiersbe

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC

DxD This Week

Call to Action

Lead a dedicated time of prayer for racial and ethnic harmony. Emphasize the BBC ministry partners who are working in cross cultural environments.

For Next Week

Session Title

- Unhindered

Main Passages

- Acts 23:11; 25:9-12; 28:23-31

Session Outline

1. Comfort for Paul (Acts 23:11)
2. Paul Takes a Stand (Acts 25:9-12)
3. The Gospel Keeps Going (Acts 28:23-31)

Memorize

*Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"
And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and
your household." - Acts 16:30-31*

Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Extended Commentary

Acts 16:11-40

16:11–12 Philippi was a leading city of Macedonia but not the capital (Thessalonica). It was a Roman colony where a number of military veterans lived after completing their service. As a result, Roman law was in effect in Philippi.

16:13 The place of prayer refers to the place where Jews of the city gathered. Philippi apparently did not have a synagogue, since only women and no men are mentioned. The establishment of a synagogue required the participation of at least ten Jewish men. Paul and his companions met with this group of women on the Sabbath, following the pattern of evangelization he had practiced on his first missionary journey.

16:14 The name Lydia may have been a personal name, or it could merely indicate that this woman was from the city of Lydia. She is the only woman named in this passage (vv. 11–14). She was likely a prominent woman since Luke singled her out for her responsiveness to Paul’s message. The purple cloth she sold had important uses in the Roman Empire. Luke combined both human and divine initiative in the description of Lydia’s response. The Lord opened her heart, and she responded to what Paul said.

16:15 Household baptism is mentioned several times in the book of Acts (vv. 31–34; 18:8; cp. 11:14). It is never stated who exactly was involved in such baptisms. If the leader of a household converted, perhaps others of the household (children, servants, spouse, etc.) were persuaded to respond in the same way. It is assumed on the basis of Lydia’s response (16:14) and her question to Paul after her baptism (if you consider me a believer in the Lord) that her confession of faith preceded her baptism. This suggests that only those of the household who were mature enough to make their own positive response to the gospel would have been baptized.

16:16 That the slave girl had a spirit by which she predicted the future implies demonic possession. The ancients were very interested in oracles and prophecies, hence the girl earned income for her owners.

16:17–18 Though the girl cried out truth about Paul and his companions, Paul was greatly annoyed. Luke does not say why, but presumably Paul was irritated at the wild and distracting manner in which the girl carried on. Her manner would repel rather than attract crowds.

16:19 Paul and Silas were arrested for cutting off the revenue from this girl’s fortune-telling, not for a religious violation.

16:20–21 Paul and Silas were accused of causing civil disorder and promoting customs that were not legal among Romans. The practice of variant religion was not illegal in the Roman Empire, but any activity (religious or otherwise) that risked sparking civil unrest was frowned upon.

16:22–24 The chief magistrates acted rashly under the influence of the crowd. Paul and Silas were stripped . . . beaten, and thrown into jail before the charges against them were investigated.

16:25 Rather than being depressed or plotting escape, Paul and Silas displayed confidence in what God had in store for them. This was a powerful testimony to the other prisoners.

16:26 Luke does not say so, but clearly the violent earthquake was an act of God in response to the prayers and praises of Paul and Silas. The jailer understood this (v. 29).

16:27 If prisoners escaped, their Roman guards or jailers were forced to serve their sentences. Believing his prisoners had escaped, the Philippian jailer preferred a quick death over imprisonment or execution.

16:28 We are not told how Paul knew what the jailer was about to do. There may have been just enough light, Paul may have had prophetic insight, or he may have heard enough to surmise what was about to happen.

16:29–30 The jailer fell down trembling because he realized the earthquake was supernatural. This prompted him to ask the most important question in the book of Acts: What must I do to be saved? He was spared from death in the quake, spared from suicide by the discovery that the prisoners had not fled, and now wanted to be spared from God's future judgment.

16:31 Paul and Silas had a direct answer for his straightforward question: Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household. On household baptism, see note at v. 15.

16:32 Paul's initial response to the jailer was succinct and to the point. That Paul then spoke the word of the Lord may indicate that he followed his initial answer, which was aimed at bringing the jailer to saving faith, with a more detailed explanation aimed at building the new disciple's understanding of God and the Christian life.

16:33 Baptism for the jailer and all his family followed almost immediately upon their profession of faith in the Lord. On household baptism, see note at v. 15.

16:34 The jailer's joy is palpable. What looked like a life-threatening disaster became the joyous beginning of his new life in Christ. He and his family became part of the growing church at Philippi, a church that was dear to Paul. When Paul later wrote that he thanked God every time he remembered the Philippian, this man and his family may have come to mind (Php 1:3).

16:35–36 At dawn the chief magistrates ordered that Paul and Silas be released. It is possible that the magistrates ordered Paul and Silas released because they realized they had overreacted in jailing them in the first place. It is also likely that the magistrates experienced the earthquake and were told about the events at the jail, thus prompting them to fear God's judgment.

16:37 Paul knew the laws regulating punishment of Roman citizens. Having been illegally beaten and denied trial, he refused to be released and pretend nothing had happened. Paul's Roman citizenship is mentioned here for the first time in Acts (see 22:25–29; 23:27; 25:11).

Roman citizens were exempt from certain kinds of punishment (e.g., crucifixion) and were entitled to due process prior to punishment. The question arises as to how Paul would have proven his citizenship. There probably was a register in Tarsus that recorded his citizenship, but citizens also often carried small wooden tablets (some of which have been found), something like a modern passport, that they used to prove their citizenship. Perhaps Paul carried such a document.

16:38 The fear of the magistrates is understandable. Philippi was a Roman colony that followed Roman law. Many people in the town would have known about the rights of a Roman citizen.

16:39–40 Though not obligated to do so, Paul and Silas chose to count the apology as amends for the wrongs they had suffered. Many times it is best for the Christian to forego demanding full justice.

References

1. M. David Sills, “Opportunities and Challenges in Global Missions,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1748–1749.

Author Bio

Derwin Gray (How to Heal Our Racial Divide)

Dr. Derwin L. Gray is the cofounder along with his wife Vicki, and leader pastor of Transformation Church, a multiethnic, multigenerational, mission-shaped church in the Charlotte, NC, area. Dr. Gray has been married since 1992 and has two adult children. He played six seasons in the NFL. In 2015, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Southern Evangelical Seminary. In 2018, he received his Doctor of Ministry in the New Testament in Context at Northern Seminary under Dr. Scot McKnight. He is the author of several books, including the national bestseller, *The Good Life*.

Charles Swindoll (Acts)

Charles R. Swindoll is the founder and senior pastor–teacher of Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas. But Chuck’s listening audience extends far beyond a local church body, as *Insight for Living* airs on major Christian radio markets around the world. Chuck’s extensive writing ministry has also served the body of Christ worldwide, and his leadership as president and now chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary has helped prepare and equip a new generation of men and women for ministry. Chuck and his wife, Cynthia, his partner in life and ministry, have four grown children, ten grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren.

Warren Wiersbe (Be Daring)

Warren W. Wiersbe, former pastor of the Moody Church and general director of *Back to the Bible*, has traveled widely as a Bible teacher and conference speaker. Because of his encouragement to those in ministry, Dr. Wiersbe is often referred to as “the pastor’s pastor.” He has ministered in churches and conferences throughout the United States as well as in Canada, Central and South America, and Europe. Dr. Wiersbe has written over 150 books, including the popular BE series of commentaries on every book of the Bible, which has sold more than four million copies. At the 2002 Christian Booksellers Convention, he was awarded the Gold Medallion Lifetime Achievement Award by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. Dr. Wiersbe and his wife, Betty, live in Lincoln, Nebraska.