

Exegetical Notes, Acts 16:16-40

“In Jail”

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Acts 16:16-40

Verses 16-18

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling.¹⁷ She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.”¹⁸ She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!” At that moment the spirit left her.

- Since Paul remained for some time in Philippi (see Acts 16:11-12), he made it his regular habit to visit the place of prayer (See exegetical notes of Acts 16:13).
- On one occasion as he traveled there he encountered a woman who predicted the future through a “spirit.” The Greek word used here is “python.” Many Greeks worshipped a python snake as a god. A person who spoke under the influence of that group was called a python. This woman claimed to be able to tell the future by the power of the snake god. The woman was a slave, and she made a great deal of money for her owners through fortune telling.
- She followed Paul through the streets of Philippi shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” She did this for many days.
- The woman was telling the truth. But Paul became annoyed with her behavior. Who would want a woman who served the snake god following them and shouting out about them, even if she was telling the truth? He commanded the evil spirit which she served to leave her, and it left her.

Verses 18-21

When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities.²⁰ They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar²¹ by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.”

- The woman’s owners realized that she had lost her value to them in that she could no longer tell fortunes. They brought charges against Paul and Silas for this reason.
- They claimed that Paul and Silas were Jews, which they had been before becoming Christians. They said that Paul and Silas were teaching things which were destroying the civil order in Philippi. While Judaism had the official sanction of the Roman government and was an “allowed or tolerated” religion in the Roman Empire, Christians did not have that sanction. It was considered “religio illicita,” an illegal religion. It was so considered until the early third century. Thus, practicing Christianity was illegal.

Verses 22-24

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods.²³ After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.²⁴ When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

- The crowd joined the woman’s owners in these charges.
- To punish Paul and Silas for practicing an illegal religion and inviting others to join them, the political leaders of the community stripped them of their clothing and beat them with rods.
- After the flogging, Paul and Silas were put in prison. The jailer was ordered to be sure that they did not escape. So he put them in a secured place with their feet chained to the wall.

Verses 25-28

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose.²⁷ The jailer woke up,

and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

- Near midnight, as Paul and Silas were worshipping God in prison, there was a violent earthquake which shook the foundations of the prison and opened all of the cell doors. At the same time, the chains which bound the prisoners fell off of them. Because the doors were open and the chains released, the prisoners were free to flee.
- Seeing what had happened, the jailer was prepared to kill himself knowing that he would be executed because the prisoners had escaped.
- But Paul stopped him and assured him that all of the prisoners were still there.

Verses 29-34

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.

³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

³¹ They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. ³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

- The jailer was so impressed by what had happened that he fell before Paul and Silas and asked them how he could be saved.
- They told him to believe in Jesus and that through Jesus he would be saved. They spoke to him and the members of his household about Jesus and about how to be saved by trusting Jesus.
- The jailer ministered to their physical needs, the wounds caused by the flogging. And then he asked Paul and Silas to baptize him then and there.
- Paul and Silas baptized the jailer and the confessing members of his household. The jailer fed them and rejoiced because he had come to know Jesus as his Savior and Lord.

Verses 35-39

³⁵ When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: “Release those men.” ³⁶ The jailer told Paul, “The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace.”

³⁷ But Paul said to the officers: “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.”

³⁸ The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. ³⁹ They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city.

- In the morning, the leaders of the city sent word to the jailer that Paul and Silas should be released. The jailer was overjoyed at this news and told Paul and Silas that they were free to go.
- But Paul and Silas would not leave. They claimed that they were Roman citizens who had been publically beaten without a trial. Roman citizens could not be punished for any offense unless there was a trial. They insisted that the leaders would need to apologize to them officially before the matter was resolved by coming to the jail personally to set them free.
- Realizing that they had abused the rights of Roman citizens, the leaders were worried. They came to the prison personally to apologize and set Paul and Silas free. They also requested that Paul and Silas move on.

Verse 40

⁴⁰ After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.

- Paul and Silas left the prison without any trouble. They went to say good-bye to the church at Lydia’s house and then left Philippi.

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