

Ouachita Baptist University

Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita

Vaught Sermon Notes: A Study of the Book of Acts

W.O. Vaught Archive

2-21-1983

Paul and Silas in the Philippian Jail: The Earthquake and the Midnight Miracle

W. O. Vaught

Ouachita Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/vn_acts



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vaught, W. O., "Paul and Silas in the Philippian Jail: The Earthquake and the Midnight Miracle" (1983).

Vaught Sermon Notes: A Study of the Book of Acts. 65.

https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/vn_acts/65

This Sermon Notes is brought to you for free and open access by the W.O. Vaught Archive at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vaught Sermon Notes: A Study of the Book of Acts by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.

PAUL AND SILAS IN THE PHILIPPIAN JAIL--THE EARTHQUAKE
AND THE MIDNIGHT MIRACLE

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
ACTS NO. 67
ACTS 16:19-31

Dr. W. O. Vaught, Jr.
Immanuel Baptist Church
Little Rock, Arkansas

ACTS 16:19-31 "And when her masters saw that the hope of their gains was gone, they caught Paul and Silas, and drew them into the marketplace unto the rulers, And brought them to the magistrates, saying, These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city, And teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans. And the multitude rose up together against them: and the magistrates rent off their clothes, and commanded to beat them. And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely: Who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks. And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed. And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled. But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here. Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."

The Apostle Paul is now in Europe for the first time. In Philippi Paul made contact with people who had positive volition toward God and he gave them the gospel and they were saved. Among the converts were two women, one was a very successful sales lady and the other was a demon possessed slave girl. In this study we find the pressure building up because the gospel Paul and Silas preached had been the means of breaking up the racket involving this poor slave girl. The only way to solve the problem of sin is to preach the gospel and to get people to accept Christ. The officials in Philippi immediately launched an investigation over the conversion of this slave girl who had been the key figure in their money-making racket. They soon discovered that Paul and Silas were responsible. The words "They caught" means that they used violent means to take Paul and Silas. "Drew them into the market place" means that they drug them by their heels. So this was a very violent act anyway you take it. Paul and Silas were in danger of losing their lives.

Now the market place is where the Romans had their courts and the magistrates who were to try this case were rulers of the Roman colony which was there in Philippi.

ACTS 16:20 "And brought them to the magistrates, saying, These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city" In this verse we see Paul and Silas being accused by the Roman judges. The word "Being Jews" comes from "huparcho" and simply means "to exist". So there is a great deal of sarcasm and race prejudice in these words. Later you will hear these judges say, "We, being Romans". So they were throwing off on the fact that they were Jewish nobodys and they were Roman citizens. "Being Romans" comes from the verb "Eimi" and is the verb for absolute status quo and means that Jews mattered very little compared to Roman citizens. Sometime before this the Roman Emperor had thrown all Jews out of Rome. So Paul and Silas were arrested on the basis of disturbing the peace.

ACTS 16:21 "And teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans." Here we have two methods by which Paul and Silas were disturbing the peace. The judges accused them of using methods to teach unlawful customs. Now let us remember that Romans were known around the world for their fairness in administering justice. So the accusation here involved patriotism of the noble Romans over against these Jews who were regarded as dogs. The real problem behind the

disturbance was the fact that these Romans had lost their key to the syndicate which made much money for them and they are hiding behind a facade of patriotism and accuse Paul and Silas of being law breakers. Now Philippi was a very corrupt city and Roman law was not as strict in Philippi as in many Roman centers.

ACTS 16:22 "And the multitude rose up together against them: and the magistrates rent off their clothes, and commanded to beat them." Here we see the reaction of this stirred-up crowd. Quite often justice is influenced by a mob and by a riot. The men who administer justice should never be influenced by the shouting of an angry mob. A mob never has and never will solve anything. So here we see the crowd is very quickly turned into a mob. Now Paul was a Roman citizen and should have had the protection of a Roman citizen, but they didn't know he was a Roman citizen, and they will regret later on the way they had treated one of their own nation. These magistrates are going to make a tragic mistake and they will deeply regret it before this chapter is over. The fact is this--law should put pressure on the mob and not the mob put pressure on the law. That's why it is important to remember--stay out of mobs and anything that resembles mob action. Of course, the law is no stronger than the people who administer it, and when people who run the government and make the laws are influenced by mobs, then you have a deplorable situation. The weakness of the law is the weakness of the old sin nature. So if you want a strong law and order regime, you have to have regenerated born again men to administer the law. Law and order makes it possible for evangelism to exist, and they both go together. You have to have law and order so people can live in peace if you expect to have evangelism. Lawlessness makes it exceedingly difficult for evangelism. In this verse we see the magistrates lose their heads completely and we will see later how they will deeply regret their action. Please notice the way things happened here. The magistrates under emotional pressure from the mob acted without thinking, without any regard for law and order and without any kind of a trial to ascertain the facts in the case. This is always the pattern of mob action and mob violence. The magistrates stripped Paul and Silas to their waist. They were being prepared for scourging. This was the common practice in the Roman Empire. A Roman official was always standing by in a Roman trial, with both rods and an axe. The rods were to be used for beating and the axe was to be used for execution. So here, without trial, the Roman Lictors were commanded to beat them with rods. The usual punishment was 39 stripes. This would tear the skin from the backs and was a very cruel punishment indeed. This was a shameful miscarriage of justice and never should have happened in a Roman province.

ACTS 16:23 "And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely" Here is an illegal imprisonment. After the 39 stripes were given to Paul and Silas, they were not only thrown in the jail but they were thrown into the inner jail and were placed under special guard.

ACTS 16:24 "Who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks." The jailer could not afford to lose a prisoner, for if he did, he would lose his own life. It says they thrust them into the inner prison, but literally it was the "under prison". The Romans went underground with their prisons. It was like a pit and a terrible, filthy place. Paul and Silas needed medical treatment but instead they were thrown into the stocks. So we have torture added to torture.

ACTS 16:25 "And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them." In this verse we have one of the most amazing testimonies in the history of Christianity. Indeed Paul and Silas were subjects of the most terrible miscarriage of justice in history. Paul and Silas would indeed have reason to complain vigorously over such unjust treatment. These bleeding and bruised prisoners, being imprisoned unjustly, with their feet in the stocks, had ever right to be bitter and upset. I am quite sure you or I would have had this kind of reaction.

but Paul and Silas kept on praying and singing. They prayed and sang, then they sang and prayed some more. We read that while they were praying and singing the prisoners were listening to them. The word means that the prisoners listened and were deeply impressed. "Epaharaomai" is the word used here and it means to listen with pleasure to a musical recital. The prisoners were astounded and spellbound. I suppose these prisoners were hardened criminals and yet they were impressed with what they heard.

ACTS 16:26 "And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed." We are going to see two miracles take place, and this is the first one. An earthquake is rather unusual for Macedonia. The result of the earthquake was that the prison was broken open, the doors fell down, and the prisoners were let loose. This was quite evident an act from the hand of God. There is no other way to explain it.

ACTS 16:27 "And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled." Evidently this jailer was a very tough man. His job required that he be tough. He was accustomed to brutal men and he usually slept right through their cries and taunts. But the earthquake awakened him and he immediately realized that all the prisoners had escaped. There was nothing left for him to do but to take his own life, and this he proceeded to do. The Greek says, "He was about to kill himself". He knew if he didn't commit suicide he would be tortured to death by the Roman officials, and he didn't want to die that way. Then, let us remember that Philippi was one of the famous suicide places of the earth. People in Philippi would think about suicide before anyone else would. Cassius, one of the Roman generals who helped kill Julius Caesar, committed suicide in Philippi. Brutus, the other one involved in the death of Julius Caesar, also committed suicide in Philippi. Right after the Romans had been defeated by Mark Antony their generals were advised not to flee on foot but to flee on their hands, and this was just another way of saying to them that they should commit suicide. So Philippi was a suicide city, and this was quite natural for the jailer to think of taking his own life.

ACTS 16:28 "But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here." Paul saw what was happening and probably yelled, "Stop it!" Then Paul told him to forget the idea of suicide for all the prisoners were still there.

ACTS 16:29 "Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas" By this time Paul and Silas had come up out of the lower prison and were up in the quarters of the jailer. Immediately the jailer got his lamp and came in and fell down before them. Trembling was a good word to be used to describe the jailer. Look what a shocking change had taken place. You would expect Paul and Silas would be the ones to be trembling, but instead the jailer was the one who trembled.

ACTS 16:30 "And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" This is one of the most amazing turnarounds in history. The jailer said to Paul and Silas, "Lords, what must I do to be saved?" So this hard, retired soldier, who was tough and knew nothing but brutality, called Paul and Silas a name that denoted respect. That jailer knew courage when he saw it. The real meaning of his words were "What must I do that I might be saved?" Now "to be saved" did not mean in his mind what it means in our minds. In his mind it meant physical deliverance. In our minds it means the salvation of the soul. We might translate it this way--"How in the world can I get out of this jam? How can I get out of this terrible situation? How can I get out alive?" But in his sub-conscious mind there was that remembrance from his earlier days that he had had God-consciousness and he had positive volition toward God. The word for saved here is "Sozo" and means physical deliverance and spiritual deliverance. So this disaster brought the jailer face to face with his need and with

od. He needed something for eternity. This question opened the door for his salvation. So this was evangelism under disaster conditions. A disaster always brings to the foreground those who have positive volition and are willing to believe. This jailer was ready to commit suicide, but he can't kill himself because he has positive volition toward God, and God is not going to let him die until he has a chance to hear the gospel.

ACTS 16:31 "And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." I call this reply "The perfect answer". Under disaster conditions the answer had to be short and to the point, and the language here indicates that both Paul and Silas spoke out at the same time, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, and thy house".

"Believe" is in the aorist tense, which denotes that you believe in a point of time. It can't be gradual, it has to have a focal point. The active voice indicates that you have to believe for yourself. No one can believe for you. The imperative mood means that it is commanded that we believe if we expect to be saved. In our next study we will see how this jailer and all the members of his household believed and were saved.