

Crystal asked me to visit her husband, Fernando, in prison. The first couple of times I visited him it was at the Fishkill Correctional Facility in Fishkill, NY. They made me remove my belt and shoe laces, wallet, phone, and keys. I could not even carry a Bible with me. He was a good looking man in his late 30's and had a huge smile on his face.



A few years later, I walked up to the famous Sing Sing prison, home to 1,700 inmates. Sing Sing is originally a Native American term for 'stone upon stone.' The nearby town is called Ossining, New York. 614 men and women were executed in 'old sparky,' an electric chair. Sing Sing is no longer a maximum-security prison, and Fernando was transferred there in anticipation of a favorable court review.



Fernando served 18 years on a life sentence for murder before he was fully exonerated. Here is a picture of when the court exonerated him. You can imagine the joy of walking out of prison after 18 years and hugging your family as a free man.



Fernando's joy wasn't just freedom — it was faith. And that's exactly what we see in Paul and Silas's story today.

Today, we are going to look at Acts 16, the story of Paul and Silas in jail, but there is more to the story than just singing in difficult circumstances. Today's true story shows us that joy doesn't wait for circumstances to improve. Joy comes from Jesus' presence and the hope of eternity — even in the darkest places.

Can you imagine singing in Sing Sing? Where does that joy come from? There are a ton of songs on KLOVE and in our worship song rotation about worshiping through circumstances, so even though it is a common theme, I believe God has given me some special insight to the text.

Sing Sing - Singing

Acts 16

1. Background, Acts 16.



The background to Acts is ...

1. The church is still growing rapidly, Acts 16:5.
2. This is Paul's second missionary tour.
 - Sharp disagreement with Barnabus over Mark, Acts 15:39.
 - Visited Derbe, Lystra (Timothy joins), Iconium, and Troas, Acts 16:1-5.
 - Vision of a man begging him to come to Macedonia (Europe), Acts 16:9.
 - Sailed from Troas to Neapolis, and then overland to Philippi, Acts 16:11-12.

Acts 16 is one story segment of the first converts in Europe (Macedonia).

- Lydia begins and concludes this story segment.¹
- We tend to look at praise as the key to this segment, but hospitality is mentioned three times.
- Deliverance could be a theme in this story as well. The slave girl was delivered from demons and her human owners, Paul and Silas' were delivered from their prison, and the jailer's family was delivered from sin.

I believe that this is **a perfect story**. It moves from an ideal state to crisis, increasing problems, back to resolution and the perfect state while introducing us to interesting characters.

How could Paul and Silas praise God while in prison?

I believe that hospitality and hope were the source of their ability to burst into praise while in a dark prison.

In life's darkest moments, Jesus' presence and the hope of eternity give the heart a song.

Let's jump in.

2. Lydia, Acts 16:13-15.

'On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we thought people would be meeting for prayer, and we sat down to speak with some women who had gathered there (Acts 16:13 NLT).'

This is a very peaceful and idyllic picture, especially compared to the prior stories.

¹ Lyle Story, *Joyous Encounters: Discovering the Happy Affections in Luke-Acts* (New York: NY: Herder & Herder Book, 2018), 229.

- On his first missionary journey Paul was almost stoned in Iconium, he was stoned in Lystra.
- Paul's view was that 'we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22 NLT).'

'One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth, who worshiped God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying.¹⁵ She and her household were baptized, and she asked us to be her guests. "If you agree that I am a true believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my home." And she urged us until we agreed (Acts 16:13-15 NLT).'

They knew the Jewish people met on the Sabbath, and they must have heard that there was a group that met outside the city. They sat down and joined them. It was probably like a small group.²

Lydia is a wealthy businesswoman. She was a God-fearer, meaning that though she was not Jewish she was drawn to worship God Almighty and not the Roman gods.

- She listened to the Good News.
- The Lord opened her heart. Isn't that a beautiful way of saying she recognized the revelation of the Good News?
- She believed, accepted what Paul was saying.
- She was baptized right then in the river.

The first thing she did was offer hospitality. She must have had a large home to be able to host them without disruption to her own household.

- 'Lydia's home ... would provide the initial base for evangelizing Philippi.'³
- This is not drudgery for Lydia, it is an honor and she has joy in serving Paul, Silas, Timothy, and likely Dr. Luke.

When you share your home and food with someone, you share a portion of yourself.

- Our drive-through meals are called 'Happy Meals,' but I question the happiness and the meal. Anyway, ancient meals were less hurried and more fun.
- It is more than food and bed, it is a co-mingling of lives, a shared experience.
- The same food necessary for life that is in me is in you; the same place of rest I experienced you did, too.

From Lydia's and joy we feel the slave girl's torment. This is the crisis.

3. Slave Girl, Acts 16:16-19a.

² Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 2388.

³ Keener, *Acts*, 2404.

'One day as we were going down to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit that enabled her to tell the future. She earned a lot of money for her masters by telling fortunes. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved (Acts 16:16-17 NLT).'"

- She is a slave and can recognize that these men are slaves of the Most High God. The demons recognize the Holy Spirit, like they did with Jesus before he cast them into the pigs (Lk 4:34; 8:28).
- What she says about them is true, 'they have come to tell you how to be saved (v. 17).'

'This went on day after day until Paul got so exasperated that he turned and said to the demon within her, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And instantly it left her. ¹⁹ Her masters' hopes of wealth were now shattered, so they grabbed Paul and Silas (Acts 16:18-19a NLT).'

What irritated Paul?

- Even though she spoke the truth, the demon was connecting its ability to prophecy to the Holy Spirit – elevating itself and bringing down the Holy Spirit to the level of the Roman gods.
- 'Genuine faith ... can never issue from demonic forces.'⁴ 'God's witnesses must depend only upon God's Spirit to testify.'⁵

Paul gives a one-word command, *exelthein*, 'go out,' in the name of Jesus.

- She is free of both the demon and her owners. Imagine her joy!
- The story mentions twice that they made a lot of money off her. Now that she could not turn a profit, they cast her aside.

'The owners, who accuse the two apostles of agitation are themselves agitators.'⁶ From the slave girl's freedom and joy we can feel the mob's rage.

4. The Romans, Acts 16:19b-24.

'So they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities at the marketplace. ²⁰ "The whole city is in an uproar because of these Jews!" they shouted to the city officials. ²¹ "They are teaching customs that are illegal for us Romans to practice." ²² A mob quickly formed against Paul and Silas, and the city officials ordered them stripped and beaten with wooden rods. ²³ They were severely beaten, and then they were thrown into prison. The jailer was ordered to make sure they didn't escape. ²⁴ So the jailer put them into the inner dungeon and clamped their feet in the stocks (Acts 16:19b-24 NLT).'

⁴ Story, *Joyous Encounters*, 230.

⁵ Keener, *Acts*, 2457.

⁶ Story, *Joyous Encounters*, 231.

- These joyless men – slave owners, magistrates, and a mob – do not see what has happened to this young lady, they only see loss of profit.
- Look at the ‘us Romans’ (v. 21). Paul will use this against them later.

This is about as bad as it can get. They are severely beaten, in the innermost part of the jail. But these are not ordinary men, they are God’s children – connected to Jesus, his earthly body, and his mission.

5. Deliverance, the Jailer, and Joy, Acts 16:25-34.

‘Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening (Acts 16:25 NLT).’

Here is the Sing Sing – singing moment. Paul and Silas are praying and singing while their feet are in stocks. They are filled with joy.

What is the source of their song, their joy?

1. Relationship (hospitality) with the Holy Spirit. ‘You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand (Ps 16:11 NIV).’
 - We are **always in God’s presence** because His Spirit lives within us – and within our brothers and sisters.
 - We are **co-mingled with Jesus’ Spirit**, like sharing a meal together.
 - In Christ means that Jesus is ‘with us always, even to the very end of the age (Mt 28:20).’
 - If you want joy in difficult times, stay connected to CIC – a small part of Jesus’ body here on earth.
2. Eternity. ‘In God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me (Ps 56:11 NIV)?’
 - ***This life is not the end, so what do a few days in jail matter?***
 - We look at our immediate situation and think it is all there is and that it will be like this forever. We have short attention spans and fail to look beyond this life. But **Paul & Silas looked ahead**, they ‘fixed their eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross (He 12:2).’
 - Tertullian wrote, ‘The legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven.’ – Tertullian, 200 A.D.⁷
 - If you want joy in difficult times, keep your eyes on heaven.
3. Trust in God. They trusted God to guide them and take care of them. If that meant suffering, so be it: ‘We must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22 NLT).’

⁷ Tertullian, *To The Martyrs*, 2.

In life's darkest moments, Jesus' presence and the hope of eternity give the heart a song.

'Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors immediately flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! ²⁷ The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. ²⁸ But Paul shouted to him, "Stop! Don't kill yourself! We are all here!" ²⁹ The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he 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, along with everyone in your household." ³² And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. ³³ Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized (Act 16:25-33 NLT).'

The Holy Spirit has several miracles here: an earthquake, the doors open, and the chains fall off.

This jailer is very emotional and decides to 'preserve his honor by killing himself.'⁸

We are not told why the prisoners stayed nor how Paul knew they were all there.

The jailer must have heard the singing and 'is emotionally shaken, perhaps even stunned that ...(these) men have been supernaturally vindicated.'⁹

The jailer moves from feeling helpless to being overcome with joy.

Paul gives them Good News and encourages them to believe. They believe and are baptized.

You have a story, too. From an ideal state, you have had moments that brought you far from God. Perhaps today, you are ready to believe and be saved. Perhaps today, you are ready to say, 'I am coming back home.'

Pray.

'He brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God (Acts 16:25-34 NLT).'

This is 'risky hospitality.'¹⁰ The jailer could be put to death or at the very least lose his job for moving the prisoners out of the jail and into his house. It is unheard of that a jailer would offer his own food to prisoners. Usually, family members feed prisoners.

⁸ Story, *Joyous Encounters*, 232.

⁹ Story, *Joyous Encounters*, 233.

¹⁰ Keener, *Acts*, 2513-15.

Let's not hurry past this moment. Luke has pointed out **three times** the key role that hospitality plays in our spiritual life:

- Lydia's home
- The jailer's home
- Lydia's home.

Here sharing food is more than nourishment, it is a response that connects Jesus' body together here on earth.

The response of the jailer is ...

- Joy – a response to God's grace. Joy replaces trembling. There is an atmosphere of joy where God's people are, regardless of circumstances.
- Hospitality – a response that connects Jesus' body together. You can be the body of Jesus to someone in difficult times. 'Now, you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (1Co 12:27 NIV).'

In life's darkest moments, Jesus' presence and the hope of eternity give the heart a song.

The story continues.

6. The Romans, Acts 16:35-39.

'The next morning the city officials sent the police to tell the jailer, "Let those men go!" ³⁶ So the jailer told Paul, "The city officials have said you and Silas are free to leave. Go in peace." ³⁷ But Paul replied, "They have publicly beaten us without a trial and put us in prison—and we are Roman citizens. So now they want us to leave secretly? Certainly not! Let them come themselves to release us!" ³⁸ When the police reported this, the city officials were alarmed to learn that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. ³⁹ So they came to the jail and apologized to them. Then they brought them out and begged them to leave the city (Acts 16:35-39 NLT).'

From 'us Romans,' to 'we are Roman citizens' with certain rights that have been ignored in the emotion of seeing that young girl set free from her demons.

Finally ...

7. Lydia, Acts 16:40.

'When Paul and Silas left the prison, they returned to the home of Lydia. There they met with the believers and encouraged them once more. Then they left town (Acts 16:40 NLT).'

Back to the ideal state.

But look at the fruit of their suffering – converts in Europe:

Salvation of Lydia, her household, and a beachhead established for the Good News.

A young girl was set free from slavery and the demonic.

The jailer and his household were saved.

Conclusion.

‘Suffering is not in vain ... (many before us) have suffered and prevailed in a joyous manner.’¹¹

The source of our song in times of suffering is our connection to Jesus’ body – our brothers and sisters – and the hope we have of eternity.

In life’s darkest moments, Jesus’ presence and the hope of eternity give the heart a song.

Joy sings loudest in the dark when Jesus is near and eternity is real.

Questions.

- Would you like prayer right now for joy and perspective to be given to you, a song in the night?
- Lydia and the jailer both used their homes to strengthen the body of Christ. What would ‘risky hospitality’ look like for you this week?
- Paul & Silas kept their eyes on eternity, not their circumstances. What is one situation where you need to shift your focus from the immediate pain to the long-term hope Jesus gives?

¹¹ Story, *Joyous Encounters*, 234-35.